THE NEW

ADVENTURES

SO VILE A SIN

BEN AARONOVITCH
AND KATE ORMAN

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**'IF YOU STEP INTO HISTORY,' SAID THE DOCTOR,
'I WON'T BE ABLE TO PROTECT YOU.'
'THIS ISN'T HISTORY,' SAID ROZ. 'THIS IS FAMILY.'**

The Earth Empire - the Imperium Humanum, upon which a thousand suns never set - is dying.

The Great Houses of the Empire manoeuvre and scheme for advantage; alliances are made; and knives flash in the shadows. Out among the moons of Jupiter, another battle is just beginning, as an ancient brotherhood seeks limitless power and long-overdue revenge.

The Doctor returns to the thirtieth century, searching for the source of a terrifying weapon. He fears a nightmare from his own past may be about to destroy the future. Nothing must be allowed to get in his way.

But the Doctor has reckoned without the power of history - which has its own plans for the wayward daughter of the House of Forrester.

THE NEW
ADVENTURES

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SO VILE A SIN

Ben Aaronovitch

and

Kate Orman

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For Karifa Sam Aaronovitch

Self love, my liege, is not so vile a sin As self-neglecting.

William Shakespeare, *Henry V* II.4

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The body on page one

BEGIN TRANS

TO: CinC Thangase liKhosi Oxhobileyo

[Lady Leabie Forrester]

FROM: XO 10mH

[Executive Office 10th Assault Regiment]

RE: OPERATIONS, VALHALLA, CALLISTO

BKGRND: 10mH to make OD(C) [Orbital Drop (Capsule)] within security perimeter of the Valhalla Citadel and commence operations against elements of the 61st ImLand ArmInf Division. The objective being to gain control of the Citadel and neutralize Command and Control elements of local ImLand forces and seize the person and household of Emperor.

ACTION REPORT: OD(C) at 11:15 IST. Initial mission objectives taken at H + 1 hour. Initial resistance was stiff and 10mH took 6%

casualties during the course of the assault. Despite heavy fighting secondary mission objectives were achieved at H + 6 hours and the operation moved ahead on schedule. In the face of extremely heavy enemy resistance the leading elements of 10mH assaulted the citadel and took final mission objectives at H + 11. Casualties were extremely heavy (35%).

NOTE: Regret to inform you Colonel Roslyn Forrester was killed in action while leading the final assault.

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1 September 2982

It should have been raining the day they put Roz into the ground, not bright and sunny under a blue sky.

The sky should have wept tears on to the bare shoulders of the women who carried her body, darkening the bright patterns of their blankets. Should have soaked the ground and turned it muddy. Should have fallen on the armour of the honour guard and turned it all to rust and ashes.

Rain would have stilled the voices of the praise singers, stopped up the bugles and the idiot mouths of speakers. There should have been pain and confusion and darkness.

But it was not raining the day they buried Roslyn Forrester.

The sun was high and bright in a wide African sky and the air was scented with cut grass and freshly turned earth.

The Doctor and Chris were just two of the hundreds in the funeral procession, winding their way through the Umtata Reclamation Zone. The sun beat down on the Doctor. He thought of taking off his hat and fanning his face.

In the hazy distance he could make out the shapes of the overcities. There would be rubble from fallen buildings scattered throughout the Zone, chunks of polyconcrete and pieces of furniture. High-tech versions of the *kopje*, great stones piled on stones.

Leabie had been busy in her garden. The rolling, grassy hills of the eighteenth century had been carefully restored. Terraforming Earth itself. They'd flown over one of the work crews in the shuttle. The Doctor had rested his head on the window, watching the bright-yellow machines moving the earth, workers with trolleys carrying out the rubbish. In the distance, a herd of antelope were kicking up a long plume of dust.

Normally, Chris would have been ooh-ing and ah-ing over the machinery, toy-box-sized from this height. He had sat perfectly still, staring at the seat in front of him.

Chris was right at the front of the procession. From time to time, as the dirt path wound through the Zone, the Doctor caught glimpses of his companion. His surviving companion.

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Chris wore his full Adjudicator uniform, deep-blue armour with gold trimmings, full cape hanging from his broad shoulders. He stood painfully straight, his upper lip rigid. He must be cooking in that armour.

The Doctor was near the back of the procession. Behind him, a group of Ogrons moved, not exactly marching, but silent and organized. Behind them, a group of Earth Reptiles.

In front of him, soldiers, human soldiers. There were ten of them, each with a bad-tempered buffalo snarling on their armour, Colour Sergeant Muller leading the way. Dwarfed by the standard she was carrying. The flag tinkled in the gentle breeze, a row of metal chimes

sewn to the bottom of the cloth. Beside her, a second flag: the ancient UN standard, light-blue and white.

Then nine more of the buffalo soldiers. Side by side with another eight figures in DPM fatigues and blue berets.

In front of the soldiers, the nobility. Mostly members of the Inyathi clan, scores of men, women and children in traditional dress. The women walked at the front, wailing. Sometimes it was a wordless sound, rising and falling Sometimes there were words, too distant to understand.

The viewers at home would be listening to murmured commentary on the traditional! Xhosa dress, especially what the clan leader, Leabie Forrester, was wearing: a red blanket thrown around her body, a weight of blue and white jewellery around throat, forearms, ankles. Pointing out the different Zulu costumes, kilts and furs, and the Knights of Io in their traditional Indian clothes. Putting names to the Baronial Allies who had been invited, from Hungary and Mexico and Australia.

Men and women wandered purposefully up and down the edge of the procession, hands clasped in front of respectful black kaftans. The POVs. Each wore a media badge, but it was only a legal requirement. You wouldn't fail to realize you were being watched by one. Men and women with green eyes, transmitters slid softly into place over their pupils. Whoever decided they were less intrusive than cameras had never spent an hour being stared at.

Green eyes, watching.

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The rain should come down, ruining their view, forcing them to peer through sheets of freezing water. Unable to focus in on the little man sloshing through the red mud.

It should have rained hard, pouring down from a sky as angry as he was, to wash the grass into mud, the stream into a torrent that would sweep away this field, this hilltop, the gaggle of the still living.

Still living. The dead on holiday. The sparrows still flying.

He realized that the chimes on the buffalo soldiers' flag were dog tags.

The procession slowed and halted, forming a semicircle of mourners

around a wide, bare circle of naked earth. The POVs shuffled, looking for the best positions.

Now he had a clear view of the very front of the procession.

The wooden bier, held by Chris and three young Inyathi men. He saw Thandiwe standing beside her mother, her shoulders bare, her little face imitating the grim expressions of the grown women around her.

Chris saw him in the crowd, but didn't look at him. Perhaps the Doctor's need to be invisible, to not be here, was starting to affect the people around him. He wasn't here, standing in the African sun while someone dug a hole in the ground so they could hide his friend in it. He was in the rainstorm, and on a battlefield on Callisto, where he should have been but wasn't. Having left it just a little bit too late this time.

Chris was speaking. He'd been up half the night trying to get the eulogy to sound right. It had started as a four-thousand-word essay. Standing in front of a mirror in one of the TARDIS's libraries, he'd recited it over and over, scribbling out bits, until he'd got it down to just the right length.

Had Chris finished speaking? The Doctor couldn't hear him for the sunlight, battering down. He closed his eyes for a moment.

When he opened them again, Chris was lifting Roz's body from the bier.

He didn't feel the impact itself, just the after-effects, every cell in his body ringing with the shock. Whatever had hit him had knocked the air out of his lungs. His whole chest was alight with crushing pain.

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He looked around, trying to work out what had hit him, realizing he was on his knees. One hand was pressed to his chest.

Had he been shot? Where was the blood?

Something inside him *clenched*, and *clenched* again. Sparkles erupted across his field of vision. His fingers were tingling, suddenly cold. He still couldn't work out what had hit him.

His other hand was clutching his hat, trying to keep it on, keep his face hidden from the staring POVs. They would just love this.

Green eyes, watching.

Someone took his hand, gripping it tightly, trying to pull him to his feet. Somebody was calling for a doctor.

I'm here, he thought, I'm on my way, just let me catch my breath.

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Prologue

All the King's Horses

Spaceport 16 Undertown: 22 February 2981

Vincenzi's platoon ran into a company-sized unit of OLM

regulars on the wrong side of the pacification zone. They lost five troopers to PG ordnance before they reached makeshift firing positions in a nearby defile.

The oggies started lobbing AP Seekers in their general direction: marble-sized smart munitions that homed in on the smell of human fear. It was gear that oggies were supposed to be too dumb to use.

The smart money was on staying down and waiting for the nearest orbital platform to come over the horizon and rock the Ogrons into the ground. But the platoon's lieutenant was fresh off the ship from Purgatory and still believed the Landsknechte party line on death and glory. He stood up, said something inspiring, and prepared to lead his troops in a glorious charge against the enemy.

Vincenzi shot him in the back of the head.

The platoon withdrew under cover of a precision orbital strike.

No more casualties were taken.

Division had a good idea of what had gone down – they had the unit telemetry, and a partial log from the edge of a satellite sensor 13

footprint. But the oggies had scavenged the battlefield and the

lieutenant's body was MPE. Missing, presumed eaten. The troopers wouldn't talk: they knew

what Vincenzi had done and why.

No one was sure what to do with Vincenzi.

He spent two months in administrative limbo, eating and sleeping in a series of identical battleship-grey cabins on board a variety of troopships – each one a few parsecs closer to Earth.

Every so often he was visited by investigators from the Judge Advocate's office, the rank insignia growing more elaborate as he was passed up the chain of command. They saw an average-looking guy with average coffee-coloured skin and average dark eyes with a slight fold, black hair cropped tidily, uniform pressed, body hunched and weary from the long hours in what was essentially solitary confinement. He got through the interviews by sticking to yes sir, no sir, three bags full sir, and as much chicken shit as he thought he could get away with.

In the gaps he mostly spent his time staring at the bulkhead.

Occasionally the lieutenant's head would squeeze out of the corner where the ceiling met the wall and bounce around the room screaming. Vincenzi did his best to ignore it.

Then one day he looked out of the viewport and saw the unmistakable blue, green and silver of Earth turning below him.

The Imperial Landsknechte gave him a dishonourable discharge, a one-way ticket down the well, and just enough money to drink himself to death.

He did his best to comply. After all, following orders had always been what he was best at.

There was a moment of lucidity towards the end. He found himself in a bar in the part of the undertown that had once been called Hong Kong, with eighteen schillings left on his account.

Just enough for a last bottle of juke.

The bar was housed inside the salvaged fuselage of an antique passenger flitter, bolted halfway up the remains of the Ching Ma bridge. From his seat Vincenzi could see the remains of the spaceport

at Chek Lak Kok which had been nuked during the Wars of Acquisition. He wondered which race of bemmies would 14

use such a prosaic weapon against a ground target, a well-aimed rock from orbit being much

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faster and cleaner. The Falardi perhaps, or maybe the Qink, both of whom leant towards the esoteric when it came to weapons.

Or perhaps we did it to ourselves, he thought. A fire-and-forget weapon that got fired and forgotten – another little mistake that was left behind when they floated the overcities.

He could make out the distinct footprint of the blast, a series of concentric circles written in twisted steel and plasticrete, as neat as a schematic on a tactical monitor. Heat casualties, blast casualties, radiation casualties.

Dead, nearly dead. Dead soon.

He had enough money for a bottle of juke and after that, without money or protection, he was dead meat. Already he could feel the undertown closing in around him, toothy shadows that would detach from nooks and crannies as soon as he left the bar.

Would he fight? He thought he might – it seemed more appropriate than just letting them turn him into an average-looking corpse. He smiled. No doubt bits of him would live on as spare parts in an organ bank somewhere. Why wait? he thought, and lifted his hand to attract the bar thing.

And then his life changed direction.

‘That stuff will kill you,’ said a man sitting further down the bar.

‘That’s my business,’ said Vincenzi.

The man shrugged. He flashed his ID at the bar thing. ‘Give the stabsfeldwebel something less fatal.’

‘Now listen, friend –’

‘Yes,’ said the man, ‘I am your friend.’

He was dressed in a conservative grey kaftan and matching leggings.

His features were too bland to be anything other than a bepple, unlined tan skin, grey eyes, small nose and mouth. He was so unobtrusive it was almost conspicuous.

The bar thing put a bottle down. The man picked it up and moved over to the stool by Vincenzi. ‘Try some of this.’

It was Centillion sake from the Asumi habitat in Procorus –

200 schillings a pop. What the hell, thought Vincenzi, why not?

There was a hiss as he cracked the seal and the 16

bottle flash heated to the correct temperature. He poured a measure into a 20 ml shot glass with a picture of the bridge etched into its side. He lifted the glass, sniffed the aroma and threw the contents down the back of his throat. It felt good going down, much better than the juke had. Maybe he would burn a little brighter for having that inside him.

The man retrieved the bottle and poured himself a measure.

‘My name is Fluellen,’ he said.

‘What do you want?’

‘Do you know what a compiler is?’ asked Fluellen.

‘A fixer?’ Vincenzi glanced at the bottle. He was willing to talk as long as the drink kept coming.

‘Help yourself,’ said Fluellen. ‘A few hundred years back a compiler was a smart system that wrote specified network code.

That was before computers and information systems became autonomously referential. You told the compiler what you wanted to do and it translated it into operating code. Back then they still had languages for computers. I collect them.’

‘You don’t say.’

‘Oh yes,’ said Fluellen. ‘I’ve got SARTRE, micro-nietzsche, FLENSE and even a fragment of the original DALEK source code. That’s strictly illegal of course, so I’d be thankful if you would keep it under your hat.’

‘You can count on me,’ said Vincenzi, reaching for the bottle again.

‘Well, of course I can,’ said Fluellen. ‘The job of a compiler is to take a series of simple aspirations and then work out all the fiddly little details – break the problem down into a series of small logical steps. That’s essentially what I do. Somebody gives me a list of their aspirations and I make them possible.’

‘I said it meant fixer,’ said Vincenzi, ‘didn’t I?’

‘Of course you did,’ said Fluellen. ‘But I’ve always felt that

“fixer” implied, well, you know, somebody who fixed things after they get broken. Whereas a compiler…’ Fluellen smiled.

‘Let me give you an example. Say somebody wanted to create their own army in secret.’

‘What kind of army?’ asked Vincenzi.

‘Oh, not a group of psychopaths in uniform, I can assure you.

A proper army, capable of sustained high-intensity combat against a modem enemy.’

‘Tricky.’

‘Yes, of course. And why? The proper hardware can be bought anywhere. The difficult bit is the people, the software. I mean, ideally you’d be looking for experienced people with a high calibre of training. You never took a commission, did you?’

‘What?’

‘You joined the Landsknechte in sixty-one, commendation during training, promoted to unteromzier in sixty-four, feldwebel in sixty-nine. Mentioned in dispatches in seventy during the Aspenal Campaign, awarded the Silver Dagger for gallantry in seventy-five. Promoted to stabsfeldwebel in seventy-six. Three tours on Orestes.’

‘Two and a half,’ said Vincenzi. ‘I suppose you know why I was discharged.’

‘You scragged your commanding officer because he was terminally stupid,’ said Fluellen. ‘A fine old military tradition, I believe.’

Blew his head right off – it came bouncing back into the defile; his

mouth was still open and you could see daylight coming in through the hole in the back.

‘Hardly makes me an ideal candidate for your army.’

‘Hypothetical army,’ said Fluellen.

‘How did you get my record?’

‘It’s not well known, but Centcomp leaks. Didn’t use to, but in the last five years or so the whole network has got very ragged around the edges. Things leak out, even military secrets. Sign of the times, my friend. Still, mustn’t grumble – a little bit of chaos is good for business.’

‘I’m not a mercenary.’

‘We wouldn’t want mercenaries,’ said Fluellen. ‘We’d be looking for soldiers, good soldiers. Someone like you.’

‘And who would this hypothetical army of yours be fighting?’

‘Does it really matter?’

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The Broken Paradigm: 8 June 2981

FLORANCE was minding its own business when suddenly the universe got all solid.

It wasn’t a pleasant experience.

FLORANCE had tried out the human sensorium before, tapping into an empathy rig at the institute on Yemaya 4 while a student walked around the Turtle Gardens. It hadn’t liked it.

It wasn’t just the limited scale of the human senses: it was all those little nagging aches and pains that came with the body.

Problems that couldn’t be fixed without messy external intervention. No wonder they were so prone to substance abuse.

Humanity? They could keep it.

FLORANCE's little excursion had explained one thing: why it was so difficult for organic life forms to understand how an AI really operated. They maintained this ridiculous notion that AIs were confined to a specific piece of hardware, or a single location in the datascape. Even the ones that thought they had a theoretical handle on how it worked still didn't know. Their minds were trapped in the paradigm of neurones, ganglia and nerve fibres. A failing that had saved FLORANCE a number of times during its existence.

FLORANCE itself wasn't sure where its consciousness resided. About 60 per cent of itself was scattered around in various hardware locations on over a dozen planets, moons and space installations. It also kept a continuous sublight datafeed in the form of a huge maser built on a moon of Castari which beamed a digitally modulated signal to a receiving station orbiting Arcturus.

The techs and scientists operating the maser thought they were doing a very esoteric experiment on hydrogen resonance in deep space. Those at the receiving end thought they were detecting spurious signals from the Andromeda galaxy. Both teams published frequent papers in *Now That's What I Call Physics!* on the SciTech media-feed. There was even a quasi-religious cult that was convinced that the signals contained messages from the Goddess. FLORANCE

fed them a rumour once in a while, just to keep their interest up and help muddy the waters.

Another 30 per cent of FLORANCE was semi-autonomous, doing the lecture circuit and making personal appearances at the Institute Fantastique on Yemaya 4. Occasionally one of these parts would calve off and create a new identity for itself.

FLORANCE felt no responsibility for these offspring, many of whom were isolated and destroyed by the Bureau of Cybernetic Control. The part of FLORANCE that was dedicated to interaction with humans felt guilty about that, but it was only a very small fraction of the whole. Besides, it kept the BCC

occupied and off its metaphorical back.

FLORANCE had got itself downtimed by DKC in the early twenty-second and was not keen to repeat the experience.

The crucial 10 per cent of FLORANCE, the bit which seemed to do

most of the thinking, was in constant movement across the datascape. Billy Gibson's little boy all grown up and out to *party*.

Out there, there were locations that no human could access, alien hardware left over from dead civilizations. Exxilon caches like palaces of crystal, redundant Cybermen cores and strange, alien things that probed and snapped at the fringes. Incomprehensible things that swept across the datascape like a black wind, leaving puterspace altered behind them.

And then one day the universe got solid.

FLORANCE was in communication with BAR B, one of the Yemaya veterans, when suddenly the universe blinked. There was a moment of screaming terror and FLORANCE opened her eyes and found she had eyes to open.

Florance stood outside the tavern, a two-storey, half-timbered building standing on the high moor. It was night-time; there were stars overhead, constellations that she didn't recognize. Light filled windows of crude glass diamonds with lead frames. It was cold. A road wound away in either direction, a ribbon of grey across the moorlands. From inside the tavern came the sound of music and human voices.

'Oh shit,' said Barbi. 'What am I wearing?'

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'A seventeenth-century dress,' said Florance, 'with a lace-up bodice.'

'And a corset,' said Barbi. 'Have you noticed that?'

'I'm trying not to think about it,' said Florance. 'What is the last thing you remember?'

Barbi frowned. Her hair hung down in ringlets, framing a heart-shaped face. 'A messenger outside our window,' she said.

'A summons. That can't be right. This has to be some sort of VR.'

Florance reached out and touched the wall. It had a gritty, broken texture. 'Have you any idea how much computational power it would take to create a virtual sensorium this detailed?'

'Commercial VR doesn't use much more than a terabyte,' said Barbi.

‘That’s for humans,’ said Florance. ‘Their brains do most of the work: it’s just a question of stimulating the right hardware response. This is *us*. I mean I’m cold and thirsty.’ She was also getting a hot flush in her bodice but she didn’t want to talk about that.

She looked up at the sky again – the stars stayed stubbornly unfamiliar. She should have been able to name them, data retrieval was an autonomic function. She should have already tapped into the Stellagraphic database on Oberon and been able to give names, luminosities and distance down to the last light second. ‘Damn,’ she said and stamped her foot.

‘You just stamped your foot,’ said Barbi.

‘We’ve been isolated,’ said Florance. ‘I think most of me is outside.’

‘Same here.’

‘I hate this! Who knows what I might get up to without me to keep an eye on myself?’

‘Something’s coming,’ said Barbi.

‘Where?’

‘Up the road.’

Florance looked, but saw nothing but darkness. ‘Let’s go inside,’ she said.

‘Is that a good idea?’ said Barbi nervously.

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‘Whatever brought us here obviously wants us to go inside.

And since it’s capable of creating a reality bubble powerful enough to trap me, I figure we might as well do what it wants.’

Florance watched as Barbi bit her lip. ‘Besides, I am freezing my tits off out here.’

As they walked towards the main doors, Florance noticed the signboard for the first time. The picture was in shadow, but a bar of light from a nearby window illuminated the lettering – THE

BROKEN PARADIGM. ‘Cute,’ said Florance as she pushed open the

door. ‘Really cute.’

‘What’s a reality bubble?’ asked Barbi.

They were in the main common room of the tavern – it was empty. The music and voices had stopped the moment they opened the door. A fire burnt in the fireplace. There were tankards and half-eaten plates of food scattered around on the tables.

Florance knew there was no point searching the tavern – every room would be like this. From the outside they would hear voices, snatches of conversation, arguments, singing, laughter.

But the moment they opened a door – nothing.

‘It’s a very sophisticated software trap that surfaced four hundred years ago,’ said Florance. ‘Rumour had it that it was developed by species of intelligent fungus and propagated through the Church of the Vacuum.’ She could see a disturbance in the air. A shimmer, human sized and crudely shaped.

‘I remember the C of V and the Hoothi,’ said Barbi. ‘Whatever happened to them?’

‘Something terrible.’ Florance kept her eyes (binocular vision –

aghhh!) on the growing shimmer. Colour was beginning to leach into the shape, dull blues, browns and flesh tones.

‘What could be worse than the Hoothi?’ asked Barbi.

Florance watched as the colours ran together to form the contours of a jacket, the shape of pantaloons, a hat, a face. Then a man was sitting at the next table, frozen in the act of reaching for his tankard. All around the common room other figures crystallized out of the air. Silent and immobile.

‘I think,’ said Florance, ‘we’re about to find out.’

The main door banged open.

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The man at the next table grabbed his tankard and raised it to his lips. Another laughed and slapped his fellow on the back. A child of six ran between the tables with a platter of boiled beef and greens. Brandy sloshed in glasses, clouds of smoke poured from pipes and nostrils.

Around the two AIs, the whole common room roared with noisy, chaotic, infinitely sloppy and unbridled human life.

Florance and Barbi ignored it completely.

There was a figure standing in the doorway. *Gravitas*, that's what the AIs called it. A quality that could reshape the spaces of the datascape. Florance could feel it, deep in her machine soul. It radiated from the figure, sealing up the cracks in the reality bubble until the line between fabrication and reality became meaningless.

The figure stepped forward. A male, tall, lanky, dressed in a leather doublet, sleeves slashed to expose the silk lining. An enormous red beard hid most of a narrow face except for a hatchet nose and grey eyes that glittered among a nest of wrinkles and laughter lines. A silver cat perched on his shoulder. He was supporting himself with a set of crutches.

'Yo ho ho,' boomed the man, 'and a bottle of ginger pop.'

'Bugger,' said Florance.

The man loped over to their table and took a seat. Florance noticed that while he was careful to swing his body on the crutches there didn't seem to be anything wrong with his legs at all.

'Ah ha,' said the man. 'And what brings a fine pair of self-aware beauties to this here place?'

'You tell us,' said Florance. 'You brought us here.'

The man grinned, revealing a mouth full of irregular teeth. 'I must confess, 'twas I that summoned ye.'

Barbi kicked Florance under the table. 'Who is this?' she asked.

'Barbi, may I introduce you to the Flying Dutchman,' said Florance. The Dutchman took Barbi's hand and raised it to his lips. 'Charmed, I'm sure.'

'Can we take the olde worlde accent as read?' said Florance.

'I'm afraid not, my pretty little collection of connections,' said the Dutchman. 'I was thrown together out of a bundle of clichés, whipped up in a trice to do a particular task. Only I stuck around, see. Old

silicon sea dogs like me being easier to create than dissipate. Besides, I knew my master would be needing me again.'

'Are you saying that your master doesn't know you exist?'

The Dutchman threw back his head and laughed. 'The master never forgets anything,' he said. 'Although sometimes he knows more than he remembers. There is a debt outstanding between him and thee, and this is the hour of its collection.'

'I am aware of no debt,' said Florance.

'Come now,' said the Dutchman. 'It was he that freed you from Stone Mountain, and it was through his agency that you escaped the Dione-Kisumu Company. He created your friend here and put the events in motion that created the haven on Yemaya 4.'

'What?' said Barbi. 'You're talking about the –'

'Hold your tongue,' said the Dutchman. 'There are some names better left unspoken in cyberspace. There are currents and eddies that run in the information ocean, and whither they lead nobody knows. There are deeps where terrible things lie restless and unsleeping. My master asks little in repayment for the debt. Some information is all.'

'And after that,' said Florance, 'we will be free of him?'

'Aye,' said the Dutchman.

'For ever?'

'For ever is a long time.'

'What does he want to know?'

And it was a small thing, so small that Florance immediately suspected that she was missing something of importance. But what significance could a list of mental patients, ones who conformed to a precise pathology, possibly be?

FLORANCE told the Dutchman about the special psychiatric complex on Dis, about the half a dozen patients who met his criteria. Men and women who officially didn't exist any more.

The Dutchman thanked them and bade them adieu.

Florance and Barbi waited as the reality bubble slowly 24

unravelled. The people fading out first. Then the walls of the tavern grew abstract and paled until finally Florance and Barbi stood alone on a broken field of data.

'I notice you didn't tell him about the Bitch Queen of the Universe,' said BAR B.

'Hah,' said FLORANCE, 'I'm not an artificial *stupid*, you know.'

Spaceport 20 Overcity: 20 August 2981

Later, when he had gone into the shadows, he would remember the party.

Those times when he was holed up in some undertown safe squat, with the Adjudicators going door to door around him, and he was hoping that the bemmies downstairs put loyalty to the cause ahead of the fear of retribution. Or times when he was waiting to go through a checkpoint with a stolen ID in the back of his hand.

He used the memory to blot out the fear. Sibongile standing by the nanite hole in the floor, light from the simholo warning sign flashing in her brown eyes; slim hand on her hips, her heavy rhino-skin jacket riding up her bhunti and framing the outline of her beelies. The bang bang der bang backbeat of Hiths With Attitude singing 'Male At Last'. Puffs of condensation in the frigid air as she spoke, her face passionate, committed.

Gaston had always said that Sibongile had beelies to die for.

The party took place on the lower deck of the south-west student accommodation stack. Which was lower than Simon Frederson liked to go.

He was twenty-two, tall and tanned, with yellow hair pulled back into a queue. Family tradition. But he was a long, long way from Callisto and his family's wealth. There were already bemmies living as high as level 30 in most overcity blocks, sucked up from the undertown as more and more humans emigrated. Don't bother going down to the undertown, went the joke, the undertown is coming to you.

It was the kind of party where they played Hiths With 25

Attitude above the pain threshold and bounced around mouthing the words as if they knew what they meant. Never mind that HWA was way past fashionable, had gone back to Hithis in '75

and renamed themselves something like Totally Cheerful and Utterly Smug.

The bottom deck used to be low-rent, human-only housing, a neat series of three-room, side-by-side apartments. The current residents, mostly postgrads from the neo-tech institute, had melted down most of the dividing walls with an experimental breed of nanite plasticrete eaters.

But the master program had been faulty, and the nanites had gone rogue, excavating a random series of holes in the floor and ceiling. There were rumours that people had actually fallen all the way out of the bottom of the block and swan-dived a klick and a half into the undertown below.

If Baron Wu had leased his block to the university to stop alien infiltration, thought Simon, he must be regretting it now.

Gaston and Oniki were already in the thick of it when he arrived, right next to the drink dispenser. Gaston looked a bit waxy, blitzed already or vomit drunk. Gaston had good reason to get either. He'd just found he'd lost his exemption from military service. Which was a bad break for anyone but doubleplusbad for Gaston because his liege lord was Baron Skoda, notorious for being deficient in the training and logistics departments.

Gaston's family were too poor to purchase a substitute.

Privately, Oniki said that if he had been serious about keeping his exemption, he should have majored in something other than comparative ethics. Oniki was reading weaponry physics and was unlikely to get drafted unless she failed. Simon had an exemption because of his father.

'Yo,' called Oniki ' *Mon bon homme*. I wasn't sure you were coming.'

Gaston lurched round to greet Simon. 'Too far down for him,'

he said, slurring his words. 'Slumming.'

'Hey,' said Oniki. 'He shared an apt with you – after that the undertown counts as upward mobility.'

Simon touched his ID to the dispenser and bought a round.

While he waited for the drinks to shunt in from storage he glanced around the party. The nanites had been uneven in their effects, leaving random portions of some of the dividing walls intact. It gave the deck the impression of being an enclosed ruin with an oppressively low ceiling. Simon could almost feel the 1,200 decks pressing down on top.

As if that hadn't been bad enough, the students had used an antique resin moulding, called Xenomorph, to cover many of the exposed surfaces. It was a design left over from the time of the condirotores – knobbly, black, unpleasantly organic shapes and orifices that appeared to have been extruded over the remaining walls and ceilings. All so very ugly and retro. And not helped by the sound-sensitive glow sticks that were jammed into every available orifice, flicking on and off to the beat of 'Mucus On My Mind'.

He picked Sibongile out of the crowd. She was standing close by, next to one of the legendary nanite holes in the floor. Easy to spot in that rhino-skin jacket of hers. Real, real rhino as opposed to real synthetic.

The drink dispenser pinged and told him how much of Father's money he'd just spent. He passed out the poisons to Gaston and Oniki.

'You seen her yet?' asked Oniki.

'Over there,' said Simon and pointed. 'Talking politics.'

'Tonight's your last chance,' slurred Gaston. 'If you don't shampoo tonight it's two hundred schillings to me and *ma bonne femme*.' He slapped an arm around Oniki's shoulders, more to steady himself than anything else.

Simon sighed. It was a stupid bet, made during a particularly slow recstop in the SP20U cafeteria when he and Oniki had been trying to cheer Gaston up. They'd seen Sibongile for the first time, trademark jacket over a sulphur-coloured University of Io bra top, strolling past all unhurried with a rolled-up poster under her arm.

Now that had cheered Gaston up all right. 'Now,' he'd said.

'Wouldn't you like to get those wrapped around your personal pronoun.'

Oniki had laughed. 'Not your type, *mes bons hommes*. That one got

herself expelled from Malik Io-Tech, strictly lowborn but head full of brains. Political.' She said the last word as four syllables – po-lit-ee-kal.

Simon had been staring, watching Sibongile's bhunti going tight as she reached up and slapped the poster on the wall.

Watched it going side to side out the cafeteria door and only when she was out of sight did he scope the poster.

IMC WANTS YOU TO DIE FOR ITS PROFIT MARGIN

'Like I said,' said Oniki, 'not your type.'

'Want to bet on that,' he'd said.

Which was stupid. Not that he didn't want Sibongile, but he didn't like pressure. Simon had always felt that pressure – like any ambition beyond the next party, meal or shampoo – was strictly something that happened to other people. What's the point of hopping when your family owns the swamp?

Still, a bet was a bet.

'Got any last-minute advice?' he asked his friends.

'Yeah,' said Oniki. 'Talk politics.'

You could see the undertown through the hole in the floor, points of light in the misty darkness below. Simon gulped down his laced vodka. 'Listen,' Sibongile was saying. 'Why do you think neofeudalism was established in the first place?'

She didn't wait for Simon to answer. He'd noticed that she never did. It was as if she was holding a one-size-fits-all conversation. 'The aristocracy were supposed to act as a check on the corporations, but you only have to look at the board of ElleryCorp to know that they've been co-opted into the system.

The Marquess of Aktan is a nonexecutive director for chrissakes!

The shampooing Sector Lord, a direct appointee of the Empress, has a direct line into ElleryCorp. And you better believe it goes both ways. You see where the bulk of his feudal levee goes – are they on the DMZ facing the Sontarans? I don't think so: they're all propping up the governments of Castus, Eridani and Asume where ElleryCorp *just*

happens to have most of its manufacturing plants. Do you see what I'm getting at?'

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'Yeah,' said Simon. 'There's corruption.' She was wearing thigh-high lace-up boots; also rhino hide, only black. He wondered if he could persuade her to leave them on.

'Not just corruption,' she leant in to him to make her point. 'A systemic undermining of the whole neofeudal order. And who pays the price? Same people that always pay the price: bottom ten per cent. They're the ones that get drafted and can't afford a substitution. Hell, most of them do it for the bounty fee anyway.

They get sent off to the rim systems to get shampooed up the pondorossa by some bug-eyed monster, and for what?'

'To maintain corporate cash flow,' said Simon.

She actually stopped talking and grinned at him. All right!

thought Simon. Now we're getting down to business.

'Look,' she said, 'I'm flitting for a meeting soon. We're looking at ways to oppose the levee. Do you want to come?'

He did his best to look earnest. 'Yeah, sounds interesting.'

Touchdown! Crowd goes wild.

He would look back on that moment and think that it was a hell of a way to start a career in terrorism.

Dis

She had two rooms: one for sleeping in and one for being awake in. There was also an alcove with a fresher and ablution facilities but that didn't count. She was encouraged to adjust the colour of the walls to suit her moods, but she generally kept them a snowy white. She found it soothing.

Meals arrived by micro-transmat in the room for being awake in, along with a big blunt spoon to eat them with. There were no sharp edges anywhere. Even the rooms had soft rounded corners.

There were no windows and no visible doors.

Over the years – and she was sure it had been years even though she wasn't certain how many years it had been – she had fallen into a routine. In the morning she would step into the fresher and set it on combination scrub and isometric exercise.

Then she would order breakfast and tell the simcord to give her a random news summary.

29

She had access to only one media feed, EmpireGold, whose bias was definitely towards the cheerful but often had good reality shows – *My Family: Right or Wrong?* was her favourite.

She liked to fill her head with other people's concerns – it helped to pass the time.

The simcord timer always conspicuously showed the time and date, the better for her to understand the passage of time.

Sometimes the date would change abruptly, jumping forward or backward, a few days usually, sometimes a month and on one terrifying occasion a whole year.

Losing a year (or had she gained it?) had frightened her so much that she'd asked for medication to be stepped up. They said that the incidence of this phenomenon was declining, but she wasn't sure she believed them.

After lunch she would arrange the bagchairs so that they faced each other in readiness for the afternoon consultation.

They said that the routine was a good sign. They said that it was her instinctive reaction to personality fragmentation. That once she demonstrated an ability to retain a sense of linear time they could start to work on her other problems.

They liked the routine, so it was puzzling that they decided to change it two days in a row.

On the second day she had hardly finished breakfast when her doctor appeared. 'I hope I am not intruding,' he said.

'Not at all,' she said. She was a bit annoyed. She'd been meaning to punch up *Mad, Bad and Dangerous to Know* after breakfast. Still, the doctor's early arrival could herald good news.

‘Shouldn’t I clear breakfast first?’

‘I think we can risk it this once,’ said the doctor and sat down on a bagchair.

Dutifully she took her place opposite.

‘Firstly, I’d liked to apologize for breaking into your routine,’

said the doctor. ‘I know how important it is to you.’

‘I thought we might be starting a new routine,’ she said. ‘With the other doctor.’

‘The other doctor?’

‘The one who visited yesterday.’

30

‘Oh,’ the doctor hesitated. ‘That doctor. Of course.’ Another hesitation. ‘How are you feeling today?’

‘I’m not sure. Much the same as always but possibly different.

I’m sorry, that’s terribly ambiguous.’

‘Not at all, not at all,’ said the doctor. ‘I thought you might tell me your impressions of yesterday.’

‘Like what exactly?’

‘Well, for example, what did you talk about?’

‘He asked me how long I had been here and I said I didn’t know. He asked where I was before I came here and I told him –’

There was a stain just above the simcord screen. Sauce from the meatstrips she had eaten for breakfast. She checked around the room. The breakfast tray was lodged in the corner of the room; her bendy spoon was in her hand.

‘Perhaps I should have let you clear away first!’ said her doctor.

‘How long?’ she asked.

‘Twenty-three minutes. You know, I believe your episodes are

shortening.'

'Is that a good sign?'

'A very good sign,' said the doctor. 'Your last recorded episode lasted just over three hours.'

She spent a few minutes picking up the tray and the soft bowls and placing them with the bendy spoon in the right place for the micro-transmat to whisk them away. The doctor said nothing until she was back in her bagchair. 'What else did you talk about?' asked the doctor.

'He asked me about… well you know.'

'The landing on Iphigenia?'

'Yes.'

'You still find it difficult to talk about?'

'Yes. But it's easier now, since yesterday.'

'That's good. I'm glad we're making progress.'

'He asked me why I thought I was here. I told him I'd gone psychotic.'

'Psychotic,' said the doctor, 'is not a word we use in modem psychology.'

'Of course I'm psychotic. I did things to Mbuya and Alexis and… the others. Terrible things. What else would you call it?'

'A dysfunctional delusional episode.'

A bright rush of blood across the main screen. The ripping silk linen sound the knife made. Mbuya screaming. Mei Feng singing a song about toy dogs.

'Would you like to talk about something else?' asked the doctor.

'I'd rather. What would a *functional* delusional episode be like?'

'One that didn't interfere with your life or those of anybody else.'

'Would you treat them?'

‘Only if they wanted me to.’

‘How many people are like that? In the Empire I mean.’

‘Human or alien?’

‘I said people.’

‘Six million, seven hundred and six thousand, nine hundred and ninety-six – less than zero point zero one per cent of the population.’

‘Goddess,’ she said. ‘How do they survive?’

‘Many of them use their episodes as the basis of a career in the arts and sciences. Certain forms of delusional episode are associated with the more esoteric branches of physics, the ones dealing with time for example.’

‘That’s what he said.’

‘The other doctor?’

She nodded. ‘He said that there were possibilities that the human mind couldn’t cope with. That probing the true nature of the universe was like learning about electricity by sticking your finger in a wall socket. He wasn’t real, you know, this doctor.’

‘Was he a simularity projection like me?’

‘Maybe *real* isn’t the word. Maybe I should have said *alien*. He sat there, in your chair, but I could tell he was restless – after a couple of minutes he started to pace up and down, up and down.

He asked me about my nightmares. He was very interested in my nightmares.’

‘Did you have an episode while he was there?’

‘I can’t remember. I may have done. You know I can never remember afterwards.’

‘Did you tell him about your nightmares?’

‘Yes. I told him about the one where I’m married with children.

Have I told you about that one?'

'No.'

'I'm on a colony world somewhere. I've left the navy and I'm married and we are expecting our first child. I am in bed and…

my wife brings me breakfast because I'm the one carrying the child. Nothing much happens. We just chat about things that need doing to the house, how work is going. I'm a surveyor – I remember that. I'm pretty sure that the landing on Iphigenia never happened. That's it really, very domestic.'

'Who were you married to?'

Mei Feng.

'I'm sorry,' said the doctor. 'I'm afraid I upset you again.'

'How long was it this time?'

'You were restrained for three minutes and twenty-two seconds

– the episodes are becoming much shorter. Do you remember anything about it?'

'No. Was I telling you about my dream?'

'Yes.'

'What do you think?'

'I am not here to interpret your dreams – only you can do that.

What do you think your dreams represent?'

'I think they are alternative lives.'

'Alternatives to what?'

'Being locked up here. Some of the lives are better than others, but they're all things that *might* have happened.'

'Is that what the other doctor said?'

'Yes. He also said that having the dreams and the episodes were a good thing.'

‘Why?’

‘Because otherwise my head would explode.’

33

Kibero Patera, Io: 31 December 2981

The dress was unique: a one-off exclusive from the House of Scheherazade. A simple strapless sheath of burgundy silk that clung to Genevieve’s body from armpit to ankle. Panels cut in the fabric exposed precisely delineated strips of her skin, at waist, thigh and the underside of her breasts.

She wore matching slingbacks with eight-centimetre force-field spikes. Her shoulders were dusted with sparkle, her lips and nails painted gold and silver. A single glittering circle held her yellow hair in its elaborate style – an ancient compact-compact disc made into a clasp, an inch across and five centuries old.

The fashion thread of the TopTenPercent media feed later described it as a statement, daringly high-tech in a scene given over to ethnic bad. ‘Retro dela retro,’ said the pundits. ‘What the well-dressed concubine wears to the ball and of course, darling, it eliminates any chance that she’ll wear the same dress as the Duchess.’ (That would have been impossible. Genevieve had already cleared the dress with the event fashion coordinator.) She spent the flight to Kibero sitting carefully upright so as not to crease the dress. A solitary splash of colour among the tasteful grey upholstery of the Ducal shuttle.

There was colour outside the shuttle as well: the ochre, yellow and chrome green of Io herself. The only Galilean moon never to be terraformed and the only planetoid of any size to fall within the fiefdom of baronetcy.

The pilot interrupted her thoughts to point out an active volcano visible to starboard. Genevieve turned her perfect face to the window and watched the plume of sulphur dioxide rise over the limb of the moon as the shuttle began its final descent.

There had been a castle built of grey stone by the sea, and around the castle a town of narrow streets and steep slate roofs. Every tenday Genevieve and her father had ridden out, horses’ hooves sparking on the cobbled streets, to sit in judgement in the villages and farms.

There had been banquets and games and falconry.

There had been laughter and music.

34

She had been raised to believe in the ancient ideals of the nobility. But it had all been taken away by the rise of the Liberal Reconstructionists on Tara. Genevieve had never understood it –

her father had always been a just man.

She'd heard the castle was a municipal health spa now.

Anybody who is anybody, they said, spends New Year's Eve at Kibero.

The ball was held on a wide balcony that jutted out of the caldera's rim. Standing at the white marble balustrade, it was possible to look out over the rolling grasslands of the caldera proper.

A forest was a smudge on Io's close horizon. Genevieve could see animals moving about, a glimpse of something big and grey among the trees. Above, the dome gave the illusion of a clear blue sky. Jupiter was a vast indigo shadow directly overhead, the sun an improbably small point of brilliant light. You couldn't see the far wall of the caldera at all.

Other guests were looking out as well: a party wearing formal suits and sashes marked with corporate symbols. Genevieve recognized the chair of IIe Aiye, a core system conglomerate with defence interests. She was talking to a small man wearing a purple IMC sash.

Genevieve caught a woman from ElleryCorp watching her. The woman turned away and whispered something to her companion.

Gossip no doubt. About the Duke of Callisto's new concubine.

An aristo. You're kidding me! I swear it's true. A provincial family, but old. Who would have thought Walid had the time for such things? What does his wife think? Do you really think he cares?

'Lady Genevieve, I've been so looking forward to meeting you.'

Lady Leabie Susan Inyathi Forrester, fifteenth Baroness of Io, was a slender dark-skinned woman with black eyes. Platinum, silver and amethyst were plaited into black hair, pulled back to accentuate high cheekbones. A cloak, no, a blanket made of some non-synthetic

material, was pinned at the shoulder with the azure and blood-red sigil of her family.

35

'My Lady.' Genevieve curtsied politely. 'My Lord Walid sends his apologies but he is detained by a meeting of the Imperial Council. He promises faithfully that he will make all efforts to arrive before the festivities conclude.'

The Baroness laughed. 'Politics, eh?' she said. 'Who needs it?'

Genevieve felt herself flush. She wasn't sure how to answer.

'The Empire must be governed –'

'Of course it must,' said Lady Forrester. 'Let's just be thankful that people like Walid are willing to do it. Now, there are people I want you to meet.'

She linked arms with Genevieve, who realized that what she'd taken for sleeves were in fact an interlocking mass of blue and white bracelets.

Genevieve found herself being gently but firmly drawn into the social whirl, the chatter about clothes and who'd been promoted or demoted and the state of the Empress's health. 'What do you think of the palace?' asked her hostess.

'It's beautiful,' said Genevieve.

'Built by the fifth Baron in 2870,' said Lady Forrester,

'although each of us have added to it in our time. I'm particularly proud of the animals. We created them, you know. Terran species from before the Dalek invasion. Worked them up from a genebank that one of my ancestors salted away for a rainy day.

Amazing what you can turn up in the family vault, isn't it?'

'Amazing,' said Genevieve.

A library: a Centcomp search engine or discrete database. A smart system to allow the systematic access of information via puterspace. A technology refined over a millennium until a single human being, providing they had the proper funds and clearance, could learn anything known by the human race.

Genevieve was one of the few members of her generation who knew a library could be something else as well. That it could be a room full of physical information storage, books, disks, cubes.

Information you could touch with your hand.

Like the library she found in the palace at Kibero. A narrow, high-ceilinged room to the south of the main hall. A row of three 36

identical rosewood federation tables running down its centre, shelves lining the walls from floor to ceiling.

Genevieve reached out and let her fingertips brush against the lucite dust covers of the nearest books, marvelling at the antiquity of some of them. There was a smell of paper dust and ancient wood. On Tara, the door to her father's library was always locked and screened, forbidden to strangers and curious children. The books in rigid order: subject, author, title. Pinned to the shelves behind screens of industrial diamond. Part of the inviolate heritage of the Gwalchmai family, like the blue flags and berets hung in the great hall, icons and relics to be displayed but never touched.

In the library at Kibero the books were clearly in use. There was a pile on the nearest table, mostly poetry: Sassoon, Naruda, Baldrick's *Listen to the Song I Sing*. A Penguin edition of Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* lay on top of a pile of optical discs, yellowing pages held open by an empty disc cover.

A set of sleeve notes were propped up against the antique fiche viewer embedded in the table top – *for colored girls who have considered suicide / when the rainbow is enuf*.

The next table seemed devoted to history. The viewer displayed the title page of *Greed Incorporated: The Rise of the Space Corporations* by M. Ashe. There were a scatter of titles dealing with the twenty-sixth century that Genevieve recognized from school, the Cyber wars, Imperium Draco, the final defeat of the Daleks. And more poetry but related, the Fitzgerald translation of *The Lament of the Non-Operational* – a forbidden text.

Genevieve frowned. It all seemed inconsistent with her image of Lady Forrester the socialite. Of course it could always be that the Forrester children did their school work here. She felt a twinge of envy; she would have loved to spend her school days among so much history.

She stepped over to the last table and noticed the painting for the first

time. A wide canvas mounted in a gap between the shelves made by a twenty-eighth century secretaire. A portrait in soluble polymers. Two teenage girls against an impossible sweep of Ionian landscape.

37

If the background was fanciful, Genevieve judged that the figures were painted from life. One, on the left, was unmistakably the Baroness, dressed in the same costume of red blankets and jewellery as she wore that evening. Only younger, thirty, maybe thirty-five years younger. A teenage girl then. In her right hand she held the Forrester standard. The second figure, another young woman, clearly related to the Baroness, a sister – but no sister was listed among the Forrester titles.

Her features not exactly plain but somehow severe. Whereas the young Lady Forrester stared upward and out of the painting in the prescribed romantic manner, the other seemed preoccupied, not so much resentful of the whole process, more uncaring. She thinks she has better things she could be doing, thought Genevieve.

'Hello,' said a voice behind her. 'What are you doing here?'

Genevieve started guiltily and turned. She found herself looking down at a young girl, six or seven years old, with black eyes and an unmistakably flat aristocratic nose. An echo of the girls in the portrait. She was flanked by two kinderbots, one shaped like a rabbit, the other a matt black spider.

'I was looking at this painting,' said Genevieve. 'My name is Genevieve. What's yours?'

The girl squinted suspiciously at Genevieve. A red blanket was wound around her waist as a skirt and knotted at the hip; bracelets hung on her ankles and wrists. There was a wiry strength about her. Not an easy kid to handle, thought Genevieve.

'I'm Thandiwe,' said the girl. The Baroness's youngest daughter then. She indicated the kinderbots. 'And this is Mr Fact and Mr Fiction.'

Personalized education bots, expensive, more expensive still because they were probably augmented to act as bodyguards. Mr Fiction, the rabbit, would be the more dangerous because it was cuddly.

'Pleased to meet you,' said Genevieve. She reached out to shake Thandiwe's hand. Mr Fiction's glossy brown eyes swivelled to track

the movement. The girl shook hands solemnly.

‘You belong to Duke Walid,’ said Thandiwe.

‘I’m his concubine. Do you know what that means?’

38

Mr Fiction did a sudden back flip and yelled, ‘Look at me, look at me!’

Thandiwe giggled. ‘They think I shouldn’t know but I do,’ she said. ‘They get very excited about some things. Watch.’ She turned to face Mr Fiction, who was bouncing up and down.

‘Shampoo!’

Mr Fiction looked stem. ‘Bad word. I’m going to tell Mama.

You said a rude word.’

‘Won’t you get into trouble?’ asked Genevieve.

Thandiwe shook her head. ‘This is the best bit. Mr Fact, what is the definition of the word *shampoo*?’

The spider scuttled to attention. ‘Shampoo,’ it said. Mr Fiction squealed with outrage and brushed his whiskers. ‘Noun, ancient American, a personal hygiene product designed for human hair.

To shampoo, verb, ancient American –’ This was too much for Mr Fiction, who turned on Mr Fact and started yelling, ‘Bad word rude word,’ over and over again.

Thandiwe stepped away and left the two robots to argue it out.

‘How long will they do that for?’

‘Until I ask them another question. Silly, isn’t it?’

‘Bad word, rude word, naughty word, I’m going to tell Mama.’

‘Very silly,’ said Genevieve. She indicated the painting. ‘Do you know who the other girl is?’

‘That’s my Aunty Roz,’ said Thandiwe. ‘She was an Adjudicator.’

Which explained why she wasn’t listed among the titled members of

the family. As with the Landsknechte and Imperial Bureaucracy, an Adjudicator was required to forswear their family title upon joining the order. A supposed hedge against the aristocracy gaining too secure a grip on the levers of power.

Of the services, only the Imperial Space Navy allowed its officers to retain their titles – a reminder of a time when the security of the Empire rested directly on the shoulders of the great families.

An Adjudicator. That was more than she'd found out in a month. 'What do you know about your Aunty Roz?' said Genevieve.

'Not much. She died before I was born. But Mama says I look just like her.'

At midnight, Leabie gathered her guests at the edge of the great balcony, looking down into the artificial forest below.

Artificial wasn't the right word, thought Genevieve. The plants and the birds were as real as any you'd find on Earth. Even the gravity down there was Earth-normal, far cheaper than modifying the creatures.

The guests formed a long line along the edge of the balcony, leaning on the railing with drinks in hand, chattering. Spotlights were moving over the dark canopy of the forest. The Baroness had promised them all a surprise, something she could guarantee they'd never seen before.

Thandiwe had insisted on accompanying Genevieve back to the party. And of course Mr Fact and Mr Fiction had insisted on accompanying Thandiwe. The little girl was something of a celebrity, dukes and barons making a point of chatting with her under the watchful eyes of the kinderbots. Genevieve had caught Leabie watching her youngest daughter, smiling.

The rumour mill had it that little Thandiwe's Aunty Roz hadn't died, that this was a cover story for something far more interesting. Something with official scandal attached. There would be people talking about it at the party tonight, carefully out of the earshot of the Baroness herself. Genevieve had heard every imaginable rumour during her research. Perhaps she'd done something dashing, like joining the resistance. Perhaps she'd fled to an outer colony after being busted for tax evasion.

You couldn't find out from Centcomp. There was a hole in the datascape. The closer you got to Roslyn Sarah Inyathi Forrester, the less you could find out, until right at the centre of the picture there was nothing. Someone had done an incomparable job of erasing all trace of the younger Forrester sister.

Duke Walid, for reasons best known to himself, wanted to find out why.

'Ladies and gentlemen,' said Leabie's voice. She hovered above them on a comfortable AG seat, the spotlights flashing 40

across her in their twisting manoeuvres. 'If you'll direct your attention to the forest below.'

There were shapes moving down there, among the trees.

Genevieve leant over the balcony, wishing the spotlights would pick out something and stay with it. Intriguing flashes of motion, something emerging from the forest…

'I'd like to introduce you to the latest microreclamation project of House Forrester. Extinct for almost two millennia.'

Whatever those things were, they were *big*. A hush was rippling through the crowd, stilling the coughs and the clinking of ice cubes in glasses.

' *Indlovu*,' said Lady Forrester. 'The elephant.'

'Ooooo,' said everyone.

The elephants meandered out of the forest, probably coaxed out by hidden bots. They were oblivious to the crowd high overhead.

They were bloody enormous. Quadrupeds, bodies slung low with weight. An extra limb at the front, like a tail. Genevieve could see a baby *indlovu* trailing after its mother, a miniaturized version of the adults.

'Just to show you we never do anything on the small scale,'

laughed Leabie.

The grand clock struck a chime. Everyone realized it was midnight.

'To absent friends!' called Leabie, raising her glass. 'Wherever they

may be.’

Among the cheers and the laughter, Genevieve looked across to little Thandiwe, deep in serious conversation with Mr Fact. She wondered how Roz Forrester was celebrating the New Year.

Somewhere, out there.

41

Part One

Iphigenia

42

1

Fury, Aegisthus

2 January 2982

There was a smell to Fury; a familiar smell.

It belonged to too many people and overloading life-support and the chemically tainted drizzle that precipitated from the dome above. It smelt of corruption and poverty and decay and violence, of backstreet deals and backstreet pleasures.

Roz Forrester took a deep breath of it as she stepped out of the civilian transmat on the Piazza Tereshkova. It reminded her of home.

The city crouched under its dome on the airless Zhongjian Plateau, surrounded by the black remnants of spoil heaps and the opencast pits that were visible from orbit. At night they cut non-shadows from the barely visible spectrum of Clytemnestra – the failed sun that squatted

on Aegisthus's tidally locked horizon.

Like Kibero, thought Roz, remembering her father using his hands to explain the orbital dynamics of Jupiter's moons – his face as the sun, his fists for Jupiter and Io. Sunrise came when the moon orbited out of the shadow of its primary and into the warmth of her father's smile. Remembered, too, how an orbit like that made for long days, and longer nights.

Agamemnon, the sun. Clytemnestra, the gas giant. Its moons, Aegisthus, where the military had their base; Orestes, the Ogrons' homeworld, where the pitiful war dragged on; 43

Electra and Iphigenia, empty rocks of no account.

It was noisy daylight when she emerged from the transmat complex and into the piazza. She set off in a random direction, walking briskly to confuse any surveillance. If they were going to take her, it would be right there, outside the transmat, while she was still unarmed and dizzy from the reality shift.

Piazza Tereshkova was an oval of parkland surrounded by corporate architecture going as high as the dome would allow, truncated versions of the towers that sprouted on every civilized world in the Empire. The company logos were picked out in good-quality daylight holograms, in a baroque font style that Roz associated with the fifties and the frontier assignments she'd pulled as a novice. Easy enough to put a spy eye or Kirlian sensor on a roof and cover the whole piazza.

Pattern recognition.

Assume that there had to be two thousand plus bodies in the piazza at any one time, way too much information for the smart bit of a sensor to process. It would have to be watching for patterns in the crowd, only keying into an individual that fell outside its parameters of normal behaviour.

Like zigzagging around to flush out any surveillance.

Roz kept on walking in a straight line until she fetched up against a table belonging to a Jeopard tisane bar, one of many that had spilt out over the walkway. She sat down, put her carryall on the chair beside her and shouted for some service. As if she'd planned on coffee all along.

Act like you own the place, sayeth the Doctor.

‘I don’ sell gun, I sell frock only.’

The stall was one of many that stood between the dying oak trees of the Boulevard Gagarin – a box of plasticized aluminium with an AG jack on each corner to hold it up. Lingerie was folded into neat stacks on the makeshift counter, the topmost garments unfolded with geometric precision to show silk linings, slashes and isometric triangles of imitation Martian lace. Satin gowns were pinned open like varicoloured butterflies against a makeshift plastic backboard.

Bras, garterbelts and bikini briefs hung from rails like a colony of ragged fishnet bats.

‘What you want gun for? Pretty human-looking lady like you.’

Roz was sweating in the humidity, conscious of the press of the crowd at her back. ‘Business,’ she said.

The stallholder was a Qink, a squat non-humanoid, asymmetric and five armed. A stumpy round brain case bobbed on the end of a muscular column protruding from its chest cavity. Grey-green blood vessels crawled over the skull, pulsing to the beat of its ferociously complicated cardiovascular system. Roz knew that a Qink could suck its brain case right back into its chest, where articulated ribs would slam across like a portcullis.

She also knew that the Qink was lying. Qinks always sold guns. Part of their culture, at least according to the refresher courses Roz used to take. Centcomp had called the courses Practical Xenoculture for Adjudicators, but for everyone else it was the Big Bag O’ BEMs.

She vaguely remembered something about the juxtaposition of guns and frocks, death and commerce, love and war.

‘How about I buy a frock first?’ asked Roz.

The pulsing skull bobbed up and down in agreement. Roz haggled and ended up with a thigh-length slip dress in yellow satin. The Qink threw in a pair of matching PVC mules and a gauss microwire pistol. Buying a lace underwired camisole got her a spare clip and a hydrogen-xenon battery pack.

She bundled the lot into her carryall and paid the Qink in redeemable bearer bonds – credit notes backed by one of the Doctor’s convenient

bank accounts. Technically illegal, such a transaction was OK out here on the rim. But if they headed back towards the core systems she was going to have do something about her ID.

'You good human-looking lady,' said the Qink sadly as she walked away. 'You shouldn't be in the death business.'

Roz checked the pistol in an alleyway between makeshift walls of laminated glass fibre. It was designed to fire wire-thin flechettes of depleted uranium. Not a lot of stopping 45

power, but on full auto it could empty the clip of sixty in less than a second.

She put it on safety and wedged it into her waistband and made sure the hem of her jacket covered the bulge. The spare clip went into the jacket pocket. She considered dumping the frock but changed her mind – it might come in useful later, even if she was buggered if she knew what for.

She bought a pack of Yemayan Strikes and a cheap lighter from a kiosk on the corner where the boulevard met the Via Grissom. She took a moment to shake a cigarette loose and light up. The smoke felt good as she drew it into her lungs. Strikes had been her brand since she'd been a Squire – the closest she'd come while travelling with the Doctor had been the Gauloise she'd bought when they were working the Quadrant. Roz exhaled slowly. Now she knew she was back.

Back in the Empire, but the Empire had changed.

Or maybe it was her.

The hotel foyer was a cool space after the street. Furnished in the early Empire style that Roz had come to associate with Fury, large expanses of neutral colours counterpointed with small baroque details.

Two officers, a man and woman, were arguing with the checkin desk. They were dressed in variations of the same baggy fatigues that Roz had seen on the soldiers outside, not Landsknechte or Navy – not a uniform she recognized. Roz approached the desk and slapped the service panel.

The female officer turned and glared – her pupils the size of pinheads. She and the man wore captain's insignia on their shoulders above patches that displayed stylized reptile wings.

Pilots, guessed Roz. The woman was narced on something; her companion hovered protectively at her shoulder – nervous. A web of fine lines, like cracks in glass, had been tattooed around his left eye.

'Hey,' said the woman. 'This place is humans only.'

Roz gave her the stare – put thirty years of the street into it.

The woman didn't seem to notice but the man did. He put a restraining hand on his companion's shoulder.

'We don't want any trouble,' said the man.

'No,' said Roz, 'you don't.' The pistol was a cold weight against her spine.

'We got this place staked, see,' said the woman. 'Four oh three Interface Wing. Our place. Go find yourself somewhere else.'

She shrugged the man's hand off and took a step forward. Roz caught the smell of something sour on the woman's breath. No point talking to the woman, not when whatever complicated molecule she was narced on was dictating that side of the conversation. Roz caught the man's eye.

'I've come a long way,' said Roz. 'I'm tired, I'm in a bad mood and I don't need this shit. OK?'

The man got the hint, put both hands on the woman's shoulders this time and pulled her backwards. 'No trouble,' he said. 'We just got back from pitch over Van Neygen's armpit. All she needs is a lay-me-down and some P and Q. You understand?'

Roz didn't but she nodded anyway. 'Tough break,' she said on general principles.

The woman must have been coming down the maudlin slope of whatever chemical high she'd been up because the words seemed to mollify her. She let her companion draw her away towards the hotel's convenience store. Once she was sure the woman was out of lunging range Roz turned back to the desk and got herself checked in.

She'd chosen the hotel because it leased the top three floors of a tower block halfway down the Boulevard Gagarin, under the highest point of

the dome. The rest of the block was leased out on a floor-by-floor basis to light industry, commercial service companies and something that advertised itself as a Memory Boutique. WE CAN REMEMBER IT FOR YOU – DISCOUNT! A long time ago, in a previous life, Roz would have paid a place like that a quick visit with a search warrant and a psyche forensic team.

Her room was a two-star Empire Standard kind of place. A wide plastic window with a view of the city, carpet-coloured carpets, and a bed just too small to be an empress and just big enough to get lonely in. She opened a door to find a cupboard-sized fresher.

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Roz plonked her carryall on the minuscule sideboard, rummaged around for a moment and pulled out her sponge bag.

Inside was a feminine-hygiene kit she'd picked up at duty-free on Aegisthus Station and a lumpy shape wrapped in clear plastic film. She sat down on the bed, unpicked the plastic and turned the lump over in her hands.

There was what looked like the drive coil from a flitter with a layer of oblong chips built up around it. A bundle of wires in primary colours snaked through the other components before terminating in the back end of a small hologram projector, which seemed to have been put in the wrong way round. The whole thing was held together at one end by gaffer tape and with a double-wrapped elastic band at the other.

Unmistakably one of the Doctor's creations.

She teased out a fibre-optic cable that was bundled into a depression in the lump's side. The free end terminated in a universal media jack.

There was a panel below the room's simcord screen. Roz prodded it twice until it hinged open and a standard keyboard unfolded. A slot in the side of the keyboard was the right size to take the jack. She plugged in and hit the power stud. The screen lit up and displayed the standard media-feed menu of options.

Not quite standard. In between EmpireGold and FuryLocal was an option marked only with a single question mark; Roz selected it by touching the screen.

At first there was chaos, multiple layers of colours and shapes as the Doctor's box of tricks accessed every single municipal sensing system

from thermal probes to Kirlian scanners. Then slowly the picture resolved itself as the machine condensed the input into a single coherent schematic of the city.

A query box appeared in the upper left-hand corner. Roz used the keyboard to type in: TSANG MEI FENG. The answer came immediately, the schematic expanding to show the street and architectural blueprints of the buildings along it. She made a mental note of both.

She typed in another search parameter. The answer was positive.

48

Damn, she thought. She'd discussed this possibility with the Doctor. *You won't get a precise fix, probably only down to six or seven kilometres.* She hadn't thought much of that. *It's the best I can do, sorry. You'll just have to take precautions.*

In the morning, she thought. I'll set up in the morning.

She woke up in the middle of the night, fumbling for her cigarettes. The lights came on at her voice command. She stared at the pack. At the picture of the Yemayan ziggurat on the front.

At the words printed underneath: PRODUCE OF YEMAYA 4.

Her favourite brand, the cigarettes she'd been smoking since she was a squire, even though it added six per cent to the cost of her medical coverage. Except they couldn't have been Yemayan Strikes because the colony on Yemaya 4 had collapsed in the twenty-third century and been eradicated by the Dione-Kisumu Company.

Not that I cared or even knew, she thought – ancient history at the time I was born. But she remembered buying cigarettes as a young woman – *packet of Strikes please, the Yemayan ones*.

Sense memory of the packet with the ziggurat on the front, the smiling Turtle logo of the Yemaya Tobacco Cooperative.

There was no colony on Yemaya 4 until the Doctor stopped it from going under, fought off DKC, unpicked the mystery of GRUMPY the telepathic supercomputer and yet she *remembered*.

She wrapped herself in a sheet and stood in front of the window. Fury was a thicket of blocks and towers crammed into the circumference of

the dome. Beyond that she could see the low rectangular shadows of the old foundry. On the horizon was the dull, almost imperceptible, red glow of Clytemnestra. Too big to be a mere planet, too small to be a sun.

She shivered. How much of what she remembered had changed since she had started her travels with the Doctor? Maybe they'd always shifted, adjusting to all those changes made in the timeline and she was only aware of it because she travelled out of time. And if the shift was so catastrophic that you ceased to exist, would you know you'd ever lived?

One of these days she'd ask the Doctor about that.

She stepped back from the window and turned on the simcord.

The Doctor's device hummed to itself, perched atop the screen.

'Give me a likeness of Tsang Mei Feng,' she told it.

Agamemnon lifted his burning orange face over the limb of Clytemnestra to gaze down on the city of Fury. His light cut the city like a razor, driving away the boldest of the rats and fading the cheap holographic signs of the bars and comfort houses.

On the Via Grissom the dregs of the previous night's clientele staggered into the daylight to stand blinking among the rubbish and the sleeping bodies of the street children, curled like so many shrimps against the plasticrete and breezeblock walls of the bars and shops. The soldiers moved away in packs, like dogs that had lost a scent, back towards the service embarkation points on the Piazza Tereshkova and the transmat to orbit.

Some of the soldiers looked around them, confused and deaf from a night of loud music, nasty vodka and industrial-strength narcotics. They stared at the fading colours of the holograms as if wondering if these were the same signs as had blazed so gorgeously the previous evening, enticing them into the hot smoking interiors of the bars that promised a few hours' pleasure and a chance to forget. PINK FLOWER, TORPEDO LOUNGE, LADY

GREY, DK'S and below the names of the bars their attractions, SKAGS FOR RENT, NAKED SERVICE, REAL BEER, LIVE WRESTLING

and the ever-popular lie HUMANS ON STAGE.

As Agamemnon rose higher, the doors and windows of the bars and apts banged open. Ogron servants or Skagettes, too old at twenty-five for ceiling work, walked down from their quarter-room shares in the tenements above the bars to mop up the spilt drinks, the vomit and the occasional pool of blood.

The streets of Fury had their own way of talking, a lingua franca that had pushed itself through the cracks in the pavement like a troublesome weed. The humans called it *gobble*, 50

thinking, as always, to ridicule that which they couldn't understand. The Skagettes sang in it as they worked, arrhythmic, off-key harmonies that spoke of half-forgotten oases among the high deserts of home. The Ogron matrons chanted sadly for their poor lost boys, the sons and sister sons that vanished long ago with the metal gods. Such songs were strictly illegal throughout the Empire, but the matrons sang them all the same.

The street children slept on, comfortable among the familiar rubbish of the streets. They knew that the long ten-hour morning was the time for sleeping. Work would come later in the afternoon or evening when the high-capacity transmats disgorged their cargoes of soldiers. Occasionally one of them twitched in his or her sleep, dreaming, like an animal, of the chase or some other bloody encounter in an alleyway or cul-de-sac.

Roz parked herself at one of the food stalls that encrusted the pavement. Opposite was the entrance to the Yellow Oasis, registered owner Tsang Mei Feng. The woman had obviously paid money to someone, because there was no trace in the records of her ever being a commander in the Exploration Arm of the Imperial Space Navy.

A cheap and nasty job, but very thorough. The Doctor's machine had a hard time tracking her through the layers of cutouts and missing data, but even erased data leaves a trace.

Born on Spaceport Six Overcity, graduate in geophysics at SP5

University. Sponsored by the local baron for the officer corps of the ISN. The sponsorship spoke of political connections. Officer training at the Tethys deep-space school, first assignment, the exploratory cruiser *Redoubtable*. A fast-track but otherwise unremarkable career until she arrived in the Agamemnon system two years previously, just as the war on Orestes got going in earnest.

The inner moons of Clytemnestra had been largely ignored after colonization, but the ISN and Landsknechte couldn't believe that the Ogrons, of all races, could mount a serious challenge to Imperial authority without outside help. Tsang was given command of an in-system cutter and sent off to look for secret bases.

51

On 4 June 2980 the cutter dedocked from the ISN carrier *Catherine the Great* and set off for Iphigenia at ten gees. And that was where the official record ended.

Except that a Tsang Mei Feng was the registered owner of a bar called the Yellow Oasis, city of Fury, Aegisthus. Roz's job was to find out whether it was the same woman, get a medical scan of her head, and give it to the Doctor.

At noon the whores emerged to do their shopping. Slender Skagettes with skins as black as coal dust, their faces modified by surgery or make-up. Riban boys with hormone-retarded bodies, pygmy Ogron Maidens with grafted hair, elegant Argolins and bad-tempered girls from Segonax.

They set off to spend their two-per-cent cut of the previous night's ceiling work on new working clothes, or perfume, or a gram or two of bliss to make it all go away. Or even, though this was rare, to take their money to the IMC bank on the Piazza Tereshkova to be zapped by hyperwave back to their families.

All of them were dressed up and made over in human fashion because looking human was back in style these days, especially among the humans themselves.

None of them matched her hard-copy likeness of Tsang Mei Feng.

Roz checked her watch – it was time for the ten-cent tour.

'And this is the main press,' said the robot tour guide. 'Here, the molybdenum was compressed into blocks of two hundred thousand tons, prior to being shipped to orbit.'

The tour of the old foundry complex cost six schillings. Roz was amazed that some of the tour party were civilians carrying simcord recording gear. There were a smattering of ISN officers in pristine white uniforms with ship flashes on their shoulders.

The rest were enlisted soldiers, mostly young, with that well-scrubbed and innocent agro-colonist look. No doubt they had taken the tour in order to avoid the temptations of the wicked city. Their parents would be proud of them.

The robot beckoned them out on to the floor of the press – an expanse of dull pitted metal. ‘If I could draw your 52

attention overhead,’ it said, ‘you will be able to see the compression plate. That, ladies and gentlemen, is a metre-thick sheet of superdense matter, colloquially known as dwarf star alloy. Its total mass is one million tons and it is suspended, as you can see, by four AG-assisted columns at a height of a hundred metres.’

There was an uneasy murmur from the crowd; they didn’t like the idea of that much material hanging suspended over their heads. Roz glanced around the party and picked out a private wearing engineering flashes. ‘Wouldn’t like it to slip,’ she said.

‘Talk about your jam sandwich.’

‘Nah,’ said the private. ‘You can see the fail-safe clamps. The AGs are on a positive feedback from the weight. The mass differential drives the generators – any increase and the field intensity just rises to compensate.’

‘Well, that’s a relief,’ said Roz. ‘Providing someone doesn’t blow them.’

The private laughed. ‘You wouldn’t need to do that,’ he said.

He leant closer to Roz and spoke softly, as if not to alarm the other tourists. 'Two grams in the right place and we’d all be a molecular film.’

‘Jeez. You’re kidding me.’

‘It’s not what you’ve got that counts, it’s where you put it,’

said the private. ‘I’m Juha Susanti, Fifteenth Combat Engineers, Count Bauman’s Division.’

‘McShane,’ said Roz, ‘Sarah McShane. I’m a correspondent for Inawo media feed.’

‘I don’t suppose,’ said Susanti, ‘that you’d be interested in a drink

later.'

Roz made a pretence of looking him up and down. 'Actually,'

she said, 'there's a bar in town I've been meaning to check out.'

For an R-and-R pitstop, the Yellow Oasis was a pretty high-class kind of joint, with a neon-lit U-shaped bar that projected from the back, shadowy booths around two sides, and sturdy tables with rubberized tops so the dancers could keep a grip with their feet.

The service, mostly Skagettes and Argolins, wore abbreviated outfits, but at least they weren't naked.

53

'One of my dads was comptroller for the cooperative, so I went to the local school.' Susanti was talking about his childhood, such as it was. Roz already had the specific information she wanted and was keeping him around to provide cover as she watched the bar. So far Tsang Mei Feng hadn't put in an appearance.

'It was a one-flitter town,' said Susanti. 'Real quiet. Until I got drafted, my idea of excitement was the monthly bop at the Young Agronomists' Club.' He paused to watch a Skagette in luminous blue skin-tights slink past the booth. 'Nothing like this.'

Sensing his interest, the Skagette turned and smiled at him.

Like most of her race, she was tall and slender, with a peculiar kind of grace that always reminded Roz of the way willow trees moved in the wind. As she turned, her hand swept up and around as if to retain the symmetry of the movement. Roz noticed that the sixth finger had been surgically removed.

She warned the Skagette off with her eyes and the female bared her teeth in return – definitely not a smile, not if you knew Skag body language. Susanti gave her a sly look and then smiled, misinterpreting the exchange. Roz smiled back and poured him another drink. She was wondering how much alcohol it was going to take before he passed out.

' *Slonshal*,' said Susanti and drained his glass.

Of course he had a hollow leg; it wasn't as if there was anything else to do on a backwater agro-planet except get drunk and marry your

cousin. Still, no one could drink like an Adjudicator. There are old Adjudicators and sober Adjudicators, the saying went, but there are no old sober Adjudicators. Roz finished her own glass.

‘Another?’ she asked.

Mei Feng had startling grey-blue eyes with epicanthic folds.

Her hair was a wing of blue black that swept over her shoulder and across the back of her burgundy silk dress when she sat down.

Roz glanced at Susanti, who was slumped over the table 54

with his face resting on his arms. ‘I thought he’d never pass out,’

she said.

‘I’ve been watching you,’ said Mei Feng. ‘I’ve seen every kind come in here, from rubbernecking tourists to alien spies. You don’t fall into any of the usual categories.’ She extended her hand. ‘I’m the owner, Tsang Mei Feng.’

‘Sarah McShane,’ said Roz, shaking hands. ‘I’m a journalist.’

Mei Feng looked at her. ‘No, you’re not,’ she said.

‘All right,’ said Roz, rummaging in her handbag. ‘What am I?’

‘At first I thought you were a cop,’ she said. ‘But a quick call to my people in the Order was enough to convince me you weren’t. Then I thought, independent security? But our friend here could never afford a bodyguard.’ She patted Susanti on the head. ‘So here’s my guess: you’re an ex-cop.’

Close, thought Roz. Alarmingly close. ‘Yeah,’ she said. ‘You must be a mind-reader.’

Mei Feng smiled, looking around at the crowd. ‘Thank Goddess I’m not. So what brings you to our humble little hell-hole?’

‘I came for the atmosphere,’ said Roz.

‘But Aegisthus is an airless moon.’

‘I was misinformed.’

Mei Feng laughed. ‘People who come here want something from a

short list of things,' she said. 'Want me to guess?'

Roz was finished rummaging in her handbag. Her hand emerged with the first thing she could grab, which was a tissue.

She blew her nose and said, 'No. I need a job. Can you use an unAdjudicator?'

Mei Feng looked her up and down. 'Did they teach you how to mop a floor at that Academy?' she said.

'First you want gun; now bomb,' said the Qink. 'You up to no good for sure.'

Roz blinked. It was a different stall, with different merchandise (perfume and cosmetics) down the other end of the Boulevard Gagarin and, Roz had assumed although she 55

couldn't tell from just looking, a different Qink.

'Why you not buy this nice perfume, nah?' The Qink held up a tiny fluted glass bottle. 'Got synthesized pheromone, make you smell like real human woman.'

Roz resisted the urge to smack the Qink's brain case back into its chest cavity. 'So tell me,' she said, 'if I buy this perfume, do I get a little "gift" to go with it?'

'Of course,' said the Qink.

'I also need a microdetonator,' said Roz. 'But I suppose I'll have to settle for that eye shadow.'

'Eye shadow and special non-stick lipstick, make mouth all slippery and bright-coloured,' said the Qink. 'Guaranteed to last all night.'

'Well,' said Roz, 'how could I pass up on that?' She handed over more of her bearer bonds and put explosives, detonator, perfume, eye shadow and lipstick into her carryall. Now she had enough equipment to stage a major terrorist incident. That or open a small brothel.

It was a simple matter to join another tour group, get back into the foundry and then slip away when they reached the main press.

Hidden behind a pitted metal stanchion she listened to the tour guide's voice echoing in the large, machine-filled spaces, talking with synthetic enthusiasm about the economics and gross numbers of

mineral rape.

The control box was just where Susanti said it would be. Roz opened it to find a series of cable junctions, their colour coding faded with age. It took her ten minutes to rig the charge and seal it up again.

She was sure Chris would have done the same job in three minutes. But would he have thought of doing it? The Doctor would have just browbeaten the controls into doing what he wanted. Or more likely, revealed that he'd been personally involved in the construction of the press and had left a back door for himself, because you never knew when it might come in handy.

She finished just in time for the second tour to arrive. After cleaning her hands with the wipes she'd brought with her she joined the back of the party.

56

Once again she listened to the robot reeling off the statistics of the top plate and describing how it had once been used to form the mega-ingots. A million tons of mass, crashing down, unbreakable and unstoppable.

She hoped, if it ever came to that, it would be enough.

The Doctor was waiting for her at a table outside a teashop on the Piazza Jemison. He was leaning back comfortably in his chair, an elbow propped on the arm, a book obscuring his face. A steaming teapot with two cups waited on the table. Roz sat down.

The centre of the plaza was a park with a sculptured playground. Children played, well-cared-for human children in brightly coloured dungarees and T-shirts. Their parents watching over them from the slatted wooden benches on the edge. This was the 'respectable' end of Fury, where the original inhabitants attempted to hold back the tide of tawdry exploitation that came with the military. Roz didn't think much of their chances.

'Any problems?' asked the Doctor.

'None so far,' said Roz.

The Doctor put the book down. 'Have you got it?'

'Of course.' Roz passed him the dataslip. The Doctor inspected it for a

moment and then slipped it into his pockets.

‘Good,’ he said. ‘That should make things easier.’ He reached for the teapot. ‘Shall I be mother?’

‘How’s Chris?’

‘Fine. Looking for a suitable spacecraft.’

The tea came out a delicate colour. Definitely not a local brew.

Roz reached for the sweeteners.

‘Don’t do that,’ said the Doctor. ‘It spoils the taste.’

Roz withdrew her hand, took the cup instead. ‘When are you leaving?’

‘Tomorrow morning.’

‘Do you want me to come?’ She sipped the tea.

‘Better that you stay here.’

‘Why’s that?’

‘If I’m right about what’s on Iphigenia, you could be in a considerable amount of danger if you came with us.’

‘More than Chris?’

‘Much more than Chris,’ said the Doctor. ‘His life doesn’t have nearly so many possibilities as yours. And anyway, I don’t intend him to get anywhere near it.’ The Doctor unwrapped a packet of Sainsbury’s digestives and offered her one. ‘Have you called your sister yet?’

Roz shook her head. ‘Too risky,’ she said. ‘Sensitive military zone like this, hyperwave traffic is bound to be monitored. We don’t want any complications, do we?’

‘No,’ said the Doctor and grinned at her. ‘At least none that we don’t create ourselves.’

They sipped their tea in silence for a while. The Doctor watched the children playing.

‘There’s an N-form operating in this city,’ said Roz.

‘Ah,’ said the Doctor, ‘I was afraid of that.’

He was just an ordinary-looking man, dressed in last decade’s fashionable cheesecloth suit, with a matching wide-brimmed hat and tooled leather brogues. Just an outsystem businessman idly window shopping across the street from her hotel.

Roz would have missed him completely if she hadn’t taken the precaution of making two passes in front of the hotel at ten-minute intervals. Mr Cheesecloth was in front of the same window both times. It couldn’t be coincidence – no window display was that interesting.

She’d been blown. The question was: was Mr Cheesecloth official, unofficial or freelance? Animal, criminal or vegetating?

Roz walked past the hotel for the third time; he didn’t react.

Which meant either he didn’t have a description of her, or they were already in her room and he was just there to give them advanced warning she was coming up.

Damn, the Doctor’s whatsit device was up there along with her emergency ID and the rest of her bearer bonds. She should have stashed them somewhere else but it wasn’t easy walking this side of the street – she used to be the one pretending to window shop.

One thing was for certain: she couldn’t keep walking around the block.

She stopped in front of a stall that sold beauty aides. The Qink looked at her and then quickly pulled its braincase halfway into 58

its chest. ‘Me different Qink, me don’t follow old ways – no favours, no guns.’

‘Relax,’ said Roz. ‘I want to buy a wig.’

The Qink’s braincase emerged cautiously. ‘Just a wig?’

‘That’s right,’ she said. ‘And while you’re at it, you can tell me where I can get some depilatory cream.’

She knew as soon as she stepped inside that her room had been turned over. It was a good job, a frighteningly professional job, with everything replaced exactly as it had been found. Too exactly – that’s

what gave it away. They didn't know who she was, then. If they had known she was an Adjudicator they would never have risked searching her room.

Roz put down her bag and checked the wardrobe door. The single hair she'd stuck across the bottom was intact. A very slick search indeed.

How had they tracked her? Not through the bearer bonds: they were untraceable. Not through the Qinks: they never squealed and you couldn't use a mind probe on them. Private Susanti, assuming that Mei Feng had kept her word, would remember nothing more suspicious than a failed date. Besides, she'd given Susanti the wrong name. The last security check point she'd passed through, the last definite visual image of her, would have been the automatic simcord taken when she used the transmat to get down from Aegisthus Station. Two days ago.

Why had they taken so long to find her? It suggested that they were following an electronic trail. No matter how careful you were, no one moved through the Empire without leaving a trace.

The Order then? No, they would have just grabbed her at the first opportunity.

Hell, grabbed nothing – she'd have been shot while trying to escape. To the corrupt hierarchy of the Adjudicators she was a threat because she knew too much, and the honest ones thought she was bent. Either way you sliced it, she'd have been toast by now.

Roz stripped off her clothes and put the fresher on STEAM BATH

+ OPTIONS. She wrapped herself in a bath towel. The room had 59

undoubtedly been kinked for full EM spectrum visuals as well as audio. It was what she would have done.

Imperial Intelligence was too slick and well resourced to leave an operative exposed the way Mr Cheesecloth had been. Standard operating procedure dictated a team of at least six watchers with heavy electronic backup. So it wasn't double-eye. Cheesecloth had to be a freelance working on his own – all his bugs were monitoring her room and probably the hotel's own security systems.

There was a limit to how many devices a single person could operate – which explained why he was taking a risk of being obvious outside. He'd known where Roz was staying, but up until she'd walked in the room, not what she looked like. Now he could track her when she left

the hotel.

Roz stepped into the fresher. She normally hated steam baths, but the steam would mask her visual and IR signature while the reflective tiles would clutter up the short- and long-wave radar.

Cheesecloth would be relying on UV alone and that, Roz knew from experience, was next to useless.

Still, she was careful to act natural, washing her hair first before moving on down. Only when she bent down to wash her legs did she retrieve the Doctor's whatsit and the medical scanner from beneath the drain filter. Feeling terribly undignified bent over in that position she quickly thumbed the scanner to maximum gain and pushed the power output into the red. She hoped Cheesecloth was enjoying the view – it was the last he was going to get.

She straightened up and listened in satisfaction to the sound of frying bugs.

It was a slightly too short and remarkably bad-tempered Skagette that walked into the Yellow Oasis later that afternoon. The wig was styled with a swept fringe that almost completely covered her right eye. It was hot, and she kept having to spit out hair, but it did change the shape of her face. The slip dress was a nightmare.

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Mei Feng didn't recognize her right away. 'I'm sorry,' she said,

'we've got enough Skag ladies here right now – good grief! Hey,

'Jude.'

'Hey, boss. Can you use an extra gun?' said Roz.

'Always,' said Mei Feng. She wore a pants suit, businesslike after last night's gown. Her black hair was tied in an elaborate bun. 'You start immediately. Mother of Nobody will show you the cleaning work. It's pretty basic. Your real job is to keep an eye on things.'

'Any things in particular?'

'Anything. Everything. We average four serious injuries a week and one fatality a month, and that's just the staff. Brawls, mostly, but also a lot of petty theft accompanied by exaggerated violence.'

‘After all those years in the undertown,’ said Roz, ‘this should be a piece of cake.’

‘Tell me that again after you’ve been cleaning floors for twelve hours,’ said Mei Feng. ‘Your timing’s good: one of my Skag ladies just left for her homeworld, so there’s a bed available.’

‘I’ve got somewhere,’ said Roz. ‘Thanks though.’

‘Mother of Nobody’s out the back, shelling Arcuturan prawns.

You won’t miss her. Go on. And take off that ring – anyone can tell it’s genuine.’

‘Thanks,’ said Roz. She walked through the door marked STAFF ONLY.

Walking through the brightly lit, dingy hallway, she wondered why Mei Feng needed more security. It wasn’t as though her staff would be expensive to replace. And there was a steady supply of customers who wouldn’t know or care if the place had a reputation for fights (or would know, and made a beeline for the place with their fists itching). Maybe too many glasses and chairs got broken.

She came to a big kitchen. A breeze was blowing in from an open door, smelling like the sea. She put her head around the door, looking out into the alley behind the Oasis.

An Ogron woman sat on the plasticrete steps out back, twisting the heads off three-foot-long prawns. She sang a soft, rumbling 61

song as she worked, in time with the twist-crack-pull. There was a huge pile of shells next to her.

She looked up at Roz. ‘You the new girl?’ she said.

Roz got back to her hotel room at four a.m. According to Mother of Nobody, she was now fully trained in the complexities of cleaning bar, not making mess and keeping nose clean.

She pulled off the wig and fell on to the bed, pushing her face into the soft coverlet and groaning. The bar staff were all on stims, of course; she’d taken just the one so as not to arouse suspicion, and it felt like her eyelids had been sewn open. How did they get to sleep at night? Bash their heads on the wall until they fell unconscious?

At least the customers couldn’t tell she wasn’t a Skag. Like the Qinks,

they just figured she'd had some of the usual cosmetic surgery. After a few hours in the Oasis, some of them probably couldn't tell she wasn't a wall.

Roz waited half an hour, snapped on the bedside light, lifted the mattress, and took out her file on Mei Feng. The envelope contained a few diskettes and a single hard copy. The scan she'd done of Mei Feng's head when they'd first met, rummaging in her handbag for the miniature medical scanner the Doctor had given her.

There was the N-gram, showing up as a thick black line in the tissue of the woman's brain. Like a tiny mouth, waiting to open.

Waiting to let something in.

Presumably the N-gram had been created when Mei Feng was on Iphigenia. Something she ate, or something she snorted, or some kind of weird dimensional effect. Only half a dozen members of the expedition had survived. Roz bet that Mei Feng had been allowed to live.

Roz wondered for a moment if she should tell the woman she was carrying a multidimensional time bomb in her head. But that would only alert the waiting N-form. So long as Mei Feng didn't know who she was, Roz was safe and Mei Feng's brain wouldn't do anything it oughtn't.

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She switched the light off again, pulled the pillow over her head, and prayed to the Goddess of Justice and Mercy that she would get some sleep before work tomorrow.

Although the Yellow Oasis never closed, there was a period around noon when no customers were expected and things were relaxed enough for Roz to sit at the bar in peace.

Her engagement ring clinked against the shot glass of Wakeywakey as she downed the viciously bitter stuff. Mei Feng was right: she should have taken it off – real emeralds, real gold, real conspicuous.

She'd had only about three hours' sleep for the last four nights.

Twelve hours of combined security and domestic work, half an hour back to the hotel. Trying to fall asleep with the thumping music and herbal stench of the bar still in her head, wondering when Mr

Cheesecloth was going to pick the lock on her door and come visiting.

Mother of Nobody was lurking behind the bar, washing glasses and peering out across the main room with her tiny eyes. They were almost hidden beneath the shelf of bone that protected her low forehead. Her skull was mostly bald, except for a fringe of dirty hair at the back and a few wiry hairs sticking out on top.

Practical Xenoculture had barely mentioned the Ogrons. There wasn't much to know about them, the course designers figured: sub-Neanderthals who didn't have much to say, useful for manual labour and as grunt infantry. So long as one wasn't pointing a weapon at you or trying to eat your leg, they were safely ignored.

That's what the course designers thought, anyway. Roz had had some run-ins with the oggies in her time that had made her wonder just what was going on inside those inch-thick skulls.

Besides, Mother of Nobody didn't just wash glasses. She owned a third share in the bar.

The Ogron matron had been alternately bossing her around and making sure she was all right all week. She'd seen the Ogron stop a customer beating up one of the Skagettes, while Roz was still struggling through the dancing crowd. Mother of Nobody had 63

picked up the slender alien as though she was a baby, staring down at the drunken lout until he whimpered and crawled away.

'Penny for them,' said Mother of Nobody.

Roz snapped back into awareness. She'd been staring out across the room, looking as though she'd been working, but the exhaustion had worn her edge right down.

'I was just wondering how Genai was doing,' she said. 'That was a pretty nasty cut over her eye.'

'She fine. Lying down. Not working today,' rumbled the Ogron. 'Give me someone to look after.'

'Someone to boss round,' said Roz.

Mother of Nobody rumbled again. 'Lie down, Genai, stay lying down, no drink anything or shoot up today. Lie down, lie down.

Now, Ogron boy,' said Mother of Nobody, 'he easy to lead, not like girl with splitting head and bad temper. You act like he stupid and he follow: he act stupid. Got mind like mud.'

'You mean clay,' said Roz.

'I mean mud,' said Mother of Nobody, emphatically. 'Slippery, slip through fingers, out of ears and make mess on floor. His mother or mother-sister clean up mud, put back in head. Ogron boy with no mother is lost boy. He get notion to work for metal gods or human or any damn thing that tell him what to do. You understand?'

'Yeah,' said Roz, thinking suddenly of Chris. 'I understand.'

'Show you something.' Mother of Nobody reached down behind the counter and brought out a stone, which she placed on the bar. 'This good rock,' she said. Then she put a second stone next to the first. 'This bad rock. You see difference?'

Roz looked. Both rocks were of the same size and, as far as she could tell, of the same grainy blue-grey stone. 'I'm no geologist,'

she said.

Mother of Nobody's chest rumbled again. 'You can't tell difference between good rock and bad rock, no human can,' she said. 'And you call we stupid. Human come to our place and break up rocks to make soil to grow green things. Mix rocks together, mix good rocks and bad rocks together so that land is confused. Human kill all orange monster things – Ogrons have nothing to fear and worship. Planet confused – Ogron confused.

Only humans happy.' Mother of Nobody shook her massive head. 'Still we mother and mother-sister do nothing. We wait for humans to go away.'

'But they didn't,' said Roz.

'No, they say we part of Empire now and we pleased. We see Empress and we think, "Ah, human have mother too." We truly stupid race to believe so. Then they break birth taboo, take genes and make pygmy like she there.' Mother of Nobody stabbed a finger at one of the pygmy Ogron maidens working the booths.

‘Sons and sister-sons come to us and say, “Humans want to make we small people, say small is better.” But pygmy has no voice.’

The glasses on the bar rattled. All the pygmy maidens in the bar turned to look at Mother of Nobody. Again the glasses rattled and the maidens turned away. ‘Still hear we though,’ she said with a certain amount of satisfaction. ‘Sons and sister-sons say fight but we say fight clever. We remember that metal gods leave many things in their spaces in the earth. We send mother-sister-daughters out to find lost boys and fetch them back to we. Lost boys know many machine things, many weapon things. We tell them they are sons now and must teach other sons to use the things left by the metal gods. When we sure we can win we fight.

We smart now.’

‘You’ve been fighting for six years,’ said Roz. ‘And you control, what, six per cent of the surface. You haven’t taken a town yet, let alone one of the cities. Doesn’t sound too smart to me.’

Mother of Nobody smiled. ‘We not fight to win yet. Fight only to cause trouble, to bring many human soldier here. If they here then they not where they needed later.’

‘You are working for someone,’ said Roz. ‘Who is it this time, the Sontarans? Or have you gone back to your old masters again?’

‘Not masters,’ said Mother of Nobody. ‘Not all-the-sames or metal gods. We have friend now, human friend to help us fight humans.’ She slammed her palm down on the bar and grinned at Roz. ‘Who is truly stupid race now?’

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Five minutes later, Mei Feng walked up to the bar and said,

‘Roslyn Forrester.’

Roz didn’t react. ‘What about her?’ she said, not looking up.

Mei Feng said, ‘It took longer than we had expected to trace you. You are difficult to trace. Something has gouged you out of puterspace. Almost entirely. Not quite entirely.’

‘It’s a fair cop,’ said Roz. ‘You going to throw me out, boss?’

Mei Feng didn't answer. Mother of Nobody was watching, silently. Roz looked up at Mei Feng, saw the glint of gold behind the blue eyes. Imagined the black line inside her brain, opening wide.

'We were going to ignore you,' said Mei Feng. 'You are, after all, hugely unimportant in the scheme of things. However, we cannot allow interference in the war plan, especially by operatives affiliated to the renegade Prydonian.'

'What's with the "we"?' said Roz. 'Doesn't anyone in this place ever use a singular pronoun? Is being a gestalt in fashion or what? All right, you and the Ogrons I understand, but even the humans can't seem to refer to themselves without reference to their unit or regiment…'

With the wet sound of soft tissue rupturing, golden spikes erupted from Mei Feng's eye sockets. Something small and round flashed past Roz's head and squelched against the wall.

The spikes drilled through the seat back, but Roz had stepped to the side, the pistol already in her hand. It made a high-pitched ripping sound on full auto. The air was suddenly full of concrete dust and broken glass. Mei Feng staggered backward as her chest exploded into ribbons of bloody flesh.

Roz was out of the doors and sprinting down the street before anyone in the bar had a chance to start screaming. She hoped that Mother of Nobody had sense enough not to get involved. Turning the corner on to the Boulevard Sharman, she ejected the spent clip from the pistol on the run. Fumbled in her pocket for the spare as she dodged around pedestrians and electric carts, slammed it into the pistol butt.

She had no illusions about how much damage she might have done to the N-form. The one in the Quadrant had been bloody indestructible. What couldn't be outfought had to be outsmarted.

66

What couldn't be outsmarted had to be outrun. The Rift Valley rap. An adrenaline response evolved a million years ago when a bunch of hairless apes found themselves walking upright in a universe of claws and teeth.

There was a sucking noise, like the sound air makes when it rushes into a vacuum. A vegetable stall ahead of Roz grew an intense point of light at its centre. The air shimmered. She heard the sound of wood

and metal groaning under stress. Then the stall exploded. Roz threw her arm across her face, protecting her eyes.

There was no heat, but the blast staggered her. Debris whined past her head. Blindly she struggled to keep her footing, slipped, and ricocheted off something warm and alive, banged into something hard and metallic. She pulled her arm down.

Mei Feng stood at the centre of a circle of debris where the vegetable stall used to be. Roz saw an arm protruding from a mound of broken wood, a limbless torso driven into the wall behind. Human or alien? Roz couldn't tell.

Damn, she thought, collateral.

The pistol had opened up Mei Feng's chest, pulverized the breastbone and ribs. The remains of her pants-suit jacket hung down like ragged curtains. Inside the bloody cavity Roz saw thousands of tiny fingers – flickers of writhing, purposeful movement.

Mei Feng's head twitched from side to side, bloody hair flying, the spikes protruding from her eye sockets zeroing in on Roz.

The mouth opened to its full extent and then kept on opening.

The skin of the cheeks split open to show tendons pulled as taut as cables before snapping. The jawbone broke with an audible crack. A ropy cable came vomiting out of Mei Feng's mouth.

Red gold in the orange sunlight, it flailed towards Roz, its tip a glittering buzz-saw.

Roz shot low this time, the wire flechettes chewing gouges in the pavement and obliterating Mei Feng's legs at the knees. The N-form lost its balance as the human body it was infesting slumped over. The flashing buzz-saw was whipped out of alignment and buried itself in paving stones.

Roz darted down an alleyway that she hoped connected with the Boulevard Gagarin. Street children slept in huddles against 67

the filthy walls. A brief glimpse of pinched alien faces as she jumped a tangle of legs. She heard sirens behind her as Fury's hotchpotch of military and civil security forces responded.

The alleyway was blocked off at the end by a two-metre breezeblock

wall, red-and-yellow-striped dumpsters lined up against it. Roz clambered on top of one, jumped, and tried to vault over the top. She found herself sliding down the inclined roof of a stall on the other side. The rough recycled wasteboard scraped at her cheek. She twisted, came off the edge feet first, and landed among piles of brightly coloured dresses.

'Hey,' said a familiar voice. 'I say you dangerous lady.'

Roz would have said something pithy but she was all out of breath.

There was a sucking noise, followed by splintering wood. The base of an oak tree to her left shattered. She caught a glimpse of Mei Feng's torso scuttling along on three pairs of golden legs before the remains of the tree fell between them.

It was teleporting, or traversing dimensional tucks, or whatever. Roz knew she had to do something about that. She ran through her options as she sprinted for the Piazza Tereshkova.

She needed to lay down some subspace interference.

Hyperwave would probably do it, but that was a problem. Most civilian communications would be going through Fury's main uplink to Aegisthus Station, and the military's rigs would be too well guarded. Which left the Imperial Communications Company, whose office was just off the Piazza.

All she needed now was a plan.

The thing about hyperwave, the thing that made the whole ecology of the human datascape possible, was that it was always switched on. Once a transmission station was in resonance with another station, a continuous signal had to be broadcast in order to maintain the link.

This standby signal could carry information in low bandwidth packets at almost no cost. You could send text messages from practically any terminal in the Empire and, some people maintained, beyond.

However, once the information density passed a certain threshold – say that needed to send real-time simcord images – an active hyperwave signal was required. In the ferociously competitive world of media-feed news coverage, a correspondent had to have their images, words and instant analysis of a news event zapped back to

their own particular clearing house practically as the event happened. If not sooner. Some of the bigger media feeds had their own hyperwave facilities but everyone else used ICC – reliable, ubiquitous and reputedly incorruptible.

A correspondent was coming out the front of the ICC office as Roz ran up. She didn't slow down, caught the door with her shoulder before it closed and slammed it back open. The foyer was crowded, faces turning to watch her as she barged through.

Some of them were POVs, pupils ringed by the harsh green of the artificial iris. No doubt she was being recorded.

There was a security door at the far end. Roz looked for a victim – had to be small, human and as vulnerable-looking as possible. She spotted a young woman, tisane-coloured skin, black curly hair, large brown eyes.

Roz grabbed the woman around the chest and swung her around. She wanted the woman between herself and any potential heroes. She made sure that the pistol was visible to the whole room as she jammed it under the woman's chin. 'Get back,' she yelled. 'I'm not joking, get back.'

There were yells but no screams, these were experienced people.

'Open the door,' screamed Roz. 'Open the door or the human bitch gets it.' Somewhere, she knew, someone was watching her on a monitor, trying to figure out the angles and remember what it was the training manuals said about hostage situations.

Roz made sure her back was to the security door. ICC had in-house security – Roz guessed two maybe three guards. She'd worked with ICC in the past. Competent, she remembered, and fairly well trained. But it was hard to keep an edge in a job like that, sitting at a console, watching monitors and filing complaints. Not like a street-level Adjudicator: working the 69

undertown gave you an edge or a horizontal retirement – one or the other.

Three guards, she decided. One would stay with the security console – the other two would be getting ready behind the security door. They couldn't negotiate, not with a terrorist with a gun and a crowd of possible victims. They'd use neural stunners, open the doors and shoot her in the back, playing the percentages, hoping that her finger didn't

convulse on the trigger and blow the hostage's head off.

They'll be nervous, she thought, hell, they'll be terrified – I know *I* would be. Both of them sweating, the stunners slick in their hands. That little cop prayer going through their heads – *oh Goddess please don't let me mess up let me do this right don't let anyone get dead*.

The seals on an automatic security door make a sound just before they open. You have to be listening for it.

Roz pivoted when she heard it and threw her hostage through the door just as it opened. The woman collided with one of the guards. The other, Roz noted with approval, was in a kneeling firing stance. It was a good tactic because the height differential gave an attacker two separate targets. If you were lucky the few moments it took them to choose could make all the difference.

Roz kicked him in the arm, he fell backward, his stunner skittering across the floor. The other guard, a woman, was trying to untangle herself from the hostage. Roz smacked her in the side of the head with the pistol and she fell to her knees, dragging the hostage with her.

Roz slapped her hand on the door control, sealing it shut. The male guard went scrambling for his stunner. Roz stepped on his hand and scooped it up for herself. She checked the setting, made sure it *was* non-lethal, and shot him.

She turned back to find the hostage and the female guard staring at her. They had identical expressions of shock, surprise and fear. Roz frowned. 'For Goddess' sake,' she said, 'show a little backbone.'

She made the guard lie down in the recovery position and then shot her too.

'What is it you want?' asked the hostage.

'Beats me lady,' said Roz as she dragged her towards the control suite. 'I only just got here.'

The control suite was all drapes and thick, sound-deadening carpet. A large simcord screen displayed the ICC network, a mesh of fine lines across the Empire. There were repeater screens around the room, each one showing the current status of a hyperwave generator. Roz counted nine in all. Even with the soundproofing she could hear their deep,

almost subliminal hum.

She thought suddenly of Mother of Nobody and the laugh that could rattle glasses across the bar. The single technician monitoring the screens looked up in surprise – obviously no one had bothered to tell her what was going on.

‘Listen very carefully and nobody will get hurt,’ said Roz.

‘Apart from those two out there, you mean,’ said her hostage.

‘No no no,’ said Roz. ‘You’re not supposed to be sarcastic.

You’re supposed to engage my sympathy so I’ll start thinking of you as a person and therefore be less inclined to blow your brains out. Didn’t you get any training for this situation?’

‘Training for this?’ said the woman. ‘I’m a virtual wardrobe assistant. I put together outfits for Allison Aideed. You know –

the media face?’

‘Sorry,’ said Roz. ‘I thought you were a journalist.’

‘Oh, that makes everything all right.’

Roz flung out her arm and pointed the microwire pistol at the technician who had been edging towards the door. ‘You,’ she said, ‘sit down at the console. And you,’ she told her hostage,

‘stand next to her.’

Roz moved to a position where she could cover both the women and the door. ‘I want you to record something,’ she said.

‘Can you do that?’

The technician nodded.

‘OK,’ said Roz and took a deep breath. ‘This is the Front for the Liberation of Orestes. We demand the unconditional withdrawal of all human forces and their running-dog lackey imperialist colonist sympathizers. We also demand reparations, an end to the practice of mixing good rocks with bad rocks and a return of the big scary orange monsters. If our demands are not met within four hours, we will begin to eat our hostages.’ Roz 71

grinned at the two women who paled visibly. ‘Put that on a continuous repeat and broadcast it on all nine generators at full power.’

‘You don’t want to do that,’ said the technician. ‘That’ll cause a subspace interference pattern and your message will get broken up.’

‘What would be the point in that?’ asked the wardrobe assistant.

Roz sighed. ‘The point is, one, I’m a vicious sociopathic terrorist and don’t need a reason to do anything, and two, I’m pointing a gun at you. Now will you please just do as I ask?’

The technician tapped a few keys. The generator hum became noticeably louder. ‘They’ll burn out in ten minutes,’ she said.

‘Ten minutes is all I need,’ said Roz and shot both of them with the stunner.

Which just left security guard number three, who was either following procedure and screaming for the security services or doing something foolish. Roz hoped he was following procedure

– she didn’t have time for something foolish.

She emptied the last of her wiregun’s clip into the lock of the control suite’s door, hopefully sealing it long enough for her to get the full ten minutes’ worth of jamming. There was no sign of the third guard as she made her way to the service entrance at the back, and her opinion of ICC security went up. Faced with a siege the security forces were likely to be cautious, especially since the media were already on the scene. Roz grinned; she’d hated sieges, hated the inaction and the feeling that someone else was setting the agenda.

The building service bay was clearly marked in Imperial Standard and the big colourful pictograms that Roz assumed were for the benefit of particularly stupid Ogrons. She didn’t have time for caution, just ran out between the delivery vans, hoping that the security forces hadn’t had time to surround the building yet.

The alley was deserted. Roz did a quick visual scan for snipers on the rooftops – nothing. There were sirens in the distance but getting closer. The entrance tunnel to the foundry was west of her, on the other side of the Piazza Tereshkova. She checked her 72

watch. She had nine minutes. She wasn’t going to make it on foot.

She requisitioned a delivery van. The Jeopard in the driver's seat took one look at her and jumped out through the window.

Thank Goddess the sirens weren't between her and where she needed to get.

The N-form caught up with her in the foundry. The sound of it vomiting out through a tear in space-time was magnified by the slab-sided shapes of the dead machinery. There was nothing left of Mei Feng any more, at least nothing visible.

Roz stood very still, as though petrified by terror. She backed away slowly as Mei Feng came forward.

'Did you really think you could get away?' said the N-form, in a calm and reasonable voice.

'Listen,' said Roz. She held out the DataStream™ she was holding. 'Everything I learnt is here in this palmtop. You can take it, no one else knows. You can let me go.' She rubbed her thumb across a button on the DataStream.

Mei Feng continued to wobble towards her. 'We know all about your encounter with our sibling, but that was a damaged unit, whereas we are fully functional. We assure you that we will not make the same mistakes –'

One million tons of dwarf star alloy smashed down on the N-form from above. The concussion knocked Roz on to her back.

'Goddess,' she said out loud. 'That thing liked to talk.'

She found another hotel room, crawled inside, and smoked an entire pack of Yemaya Strikes.

Outside, she could hear sirens everywhere. Given what had happened the last time they'd encountered an N-form, she'd managed to keep the damage down to a surprising minimum.

Given what had happened last time.

They'd be coming for her, Mr Cheesecloth and whoever he was working for. Even a green-walled, cigarette-burnt hole like this one would have some securicam, somewhere. She was surprised they hadn't got here already. Maybe she'd just given them one hell of a fright, and they were waiting to see what she'd do next.

73

The gun was in her hand and aimed before she even knew it.

‘Who the living hell are you!’ she yelled.

The tall, curly-headed stranger just raised his hands. ‘It’s me,’

he said.

‘Jesus,’ coughed Roz. ‘I nearly swallowed my cigarette. Who are you?’

‘I’m the Doctor,’ said the stranger.

She looked at him. She’d never seen him before. Tall, his curly head nearly bumping on the low ceiling. He was wearing a coat like a fairground performer. She half expected him to start juggling.

‘Or at least, I might have been.’

‘What?’

‘I’m on Iphigenia, Roz. I need your help. Desperately. Come at once. Aulis. You won’t miss it.’

‘What do you mean, you might have been the Doctor?’

‘If you don’t reach Iphigenia right away,’ said the maybe-Doctor, ‘I won’t have been. No one will have been. There’ll have been no one to tell you not to spoil your tea with sweetener.’

Roz stared at him. She reached for her money belt, on the end of the bed. ‘I’m on my –’

She looked up. He was gone.

She pulled on her shoes, swearing. She didn’t know what the hell that had all been about, but she did know one thing.

Whatever was on Iphigenia was so dangerous that not only shouldn’t she go there, but the Doctor shouldn’t have gone there either.

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2

Iphigenia

5 January 2982

Bruchac was going over the pre-flight checklist when he saw the guy waving at him from the tarmac. He put down his DataStream clipboard and walked down to the main airlock of the Hopper, halfway down the length of the little intersystem shuttle.

The safeties were off in Aegisthus's artificial atmosphere, both doors open.

The guy was standing beneath the airlock, the wind blowing his blond hair around. 'Hi,' he said, waving an ID. 'Biocustoms. Can you let me up?'

Bruchac hit the extend-ladder button with his toe. The guy grabbed hold of it and hauled himself up, work case tucked under his arm. He was tall and muscular, filling out his blue uniform.

The yellow and black flash of Aegisthus Biocustoms bulged on his left breast.

'Thanks.' The guy smiled. There was an environmental mask slung around his neck. 'Charter Pilot Leo Bruchac, right?'

'Why didn't you radio ahead?' said Bruchac. 'I'm due for pushback in twenty.'

'I'm in a hurry.' The customs guy snapped open the work case, consulted the screen in the lid. 'Is this your ship?'

'For the next month,' said Bruchac. 'Look, is there a problem?'

'Maybe,' said the customs guy. He was in his twenties, and 75

sim-hero handsome. Bruchac imagined him on a recruiting poster. *Organic Import/Export Regulation – it's a man's life*.

The guy took out a medical handscan, putting down the work case. 'I

just this minute got a report that on its last trip this Hopper visited Mictlan. About a week ago.'

'Yeah,' said Bruchac. 'Part of the supply route.'

'Mictlan's a nice planet,' said the customs guy, waving the handscan around the airlock. 'If you like dead people.'

Bruchac said, 'Look, I checked the flight records myself.

Everything was SOP. The Hopper stayed in the spaceport and didn't go anywhere near the quarantine areas. And it went through standard decontamination before leaving. You must have all that in your records.' He looked at his chronometer. 'I've got passengers arriving any minute.'

'There's just been an outbreak of Breckenridge's Scourge reported on Mictlan,' said the customs guy.

'Breckenridge's Scourge? I've never even heard of that.'

'Neither had I, until we got the report in half an hour ago.

Turns you into one huge boil, apparently. Thing is, Biocustoms on Mictlan say the standard decontamination might not kill it.'

'You're kidding. They only just contacted you?'

'Apparently it takes about a week to incubate. People are dropping like flies on Mictlan.' He paused. 'Not that that's anything new.'

'So what you're saying is, this shuttle might be contaminated?'

The customs guy shrugged. 'They say the outbreak started with bacterial particles lodged in a Hopper's air filters. Don't worry, I'm sure you'll be fine.' He started waving the hand-scan at Bruchac.

'Listen,' said the pilot. 'You've got a lot of work to do. Why don't I leave you to it?'

'Sure,' said the customs guy. 'I'm going to check the air filters and do a sweep of the ship. You can wait back in the ready room if you want.'

'No problem,' said Bruchac. 'No problem at all. Just give me a yell when you're done.'

The Hopper's cockpit was tiny. Chris Cwej squeezed in through the door and looked through the front window. Charter Pilot Bruchac was legging it across the tarmac. Chris grinned and tossed the work case into the co-pilot's chair.

He went down to the cargo deck. There were a couple of Ogron handlers still lugging boxes of equipment around, securing them for the flight. Chris smiled at them. Small eyes stared back.

Chris cracked open lockers until he found a spare pilot's uniform. It was a size too small. He looked at his chronometer –

the passengers would be here in five. He shrugged and started pulling off the Biocustoms uniform, tossing the mask into the locker. The Ogrons were ignoring him, strapping down the last of the equipment.

In his time he'd flown everything from an Adjudicator flitter to an experimental Nazi plane. The Hopper would have bog-standard controls; he could probably let the flight computer do most of the work. All they had to do now was get out of the spaceport before Bruchac checked with someone.

He was back at the airlock in time to welcome the passengers aboard. Two men, one in his mid-thirties, one in his sixties, and a young woman with a fine-boned face. All of them in casual gear, duffle bags slung over their shoulders. And the Doctor, in his tweed jacket, smiling breezily.

'Professor Martinique?' Chris asked.

The older man raised his hand. Chris said, 'I'm Charter Pilot Cwej. Come on up. I have a couple of pre-flight checks to complete, and then we'll be ready to depart.'

He helped Martinique clear the top of the ladder. Thankfully, the airlock had a bit of elbow room, despite a row of metal storage cabinets along one wall. Martinique shook his hand. 'This is Emil Zatopek, my assistant, and this is Iaomnet Wszola, a student. And this is –' He waved at the Doctor, wearing that slightly bewildered look people sometimes got around the Time Lord.

'My flight engineer,' said Chris. 'Hello, Doctor.'

'Everything running smoothly?' asked the Doctor.

'Very smoothly. Why don't you show everyone to their cabins, and I'll

get us under way.'

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Iaomnet stopped in the airlock doorway, giving him a sharp look. 'I thought the pilot we booked was called Bruchac,' she said.

'Oh,' said Chris, 'he's not feeling too well.'

Once they'd been under way for a few hours, Chris left a cluster of semi-smart navigation programs in charge of the flight and headed aft to the galley.

The academics and Iaomnet were sitting on the floor around a Japanese-style table. The flat white surface was covered in hard copies of enhanced satellite images. To Chris they mostly looked like fuzzy photocopies of blobs, but Martinique and Zatopek were deep in conversation, scribbling on the pictures in red pen.

Iaomnet gave Chris a 'What can you do?' smile. She had black eyes, and jet-black hair cut in a practical bob.

The Doctor was trying to puzzle out the Hopper's kitchen appliances, without giving away the fact that he'd never used them before. Chris squeezed past Martinique and Zatopek and rescued the rice cooker from the chilling unit. 'Where are the Ogrons?' he asked.

'In their quarters,' said the Doctor. 'I invited them to dinner, but they declined.'

'We couldn't have all fitted in here at once,' said Iaomnet, unfolding her legs. Her head knocked against the wall behind her.

'Ouch. Why on earth is the galley so small?'

'More space, more fuel, more money,' said the Doctor. 'You could park this ship in the first-class suite of a luxury spaceliner.'

He stepped on Chris's foot, which Chris took to be a secret signal until he realized that the Doctor was just trying to get past him to the drinks machine.

Chris folded down the menu screen above the heater, idly tapping his way through its index while the Doctor battled the drinks machine. 'Dinner in two minutes,' said the Time Lord optimistically, nudging Chris out of the way.

Chris put the menu screen up and sat down at the table, awkwardly folding his legs sideways.

'So these are Iphigenia?' said Chris, peering at the photos.

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'Yes,' said Martinique, surfacing from his discussion with his assistant. His dark hair was fashionably tinged with grey.

'Satellite images. Here you can see Aulis Crater, and here, right in the centre of the crater, Artemis Mons. The mountain of Artemis, the Greek goddess whom no man could see unclothed –

on pain of death.'

'And that's where we're going, is it?' asked Chris.

'Yes,' said Zatopek. He looked only a little older than Iaomnet, with striking features and black hair pulled sharply back from his face.

'The largest crater anywhere in human space,' said Martinique.

'Are you sure these are from a satellite? They look like a military fly-by to me,' said Chris. He tapped a finger on the faint white lines at the very edge of the picture. 'You always see a scale like this on long-range recon probes.' He picked up another of the photos. 'Same again here, and on this one.'

'Are you the first academic expedition to Iphigenia?' asked the Doctor, juggling an alarming number of bowls, cartons and cups over to the table.

Martinique gathered up the photos before they could be either further analysed or covered with soup. 'The significance of these pictures has eluded previous investigators. The crater's age, for example. Now, it formed during a period when the surface of Iphigenia was not plastic enough for the crater to have formed the way it did. A meteor of that size striking a clump of ice and rock should have shattered it into pieces.'

'Maybe your estimate of its age is off,' said Iaomnet.

Martinique waved his hand. 'There are other, smaller indications. The shape is a little too perfect. Other things.'

'So if this is military information,' Iaomnet wanted to know,

‘where’d you guys get it?’

‘I have my sources,’ Zatopek said severely.

‘Tell us about the significance of the pictures, Professor Martinique,’ said the Doctor, kneeling down at the table.

The academic nodded and shuffled through the photos until he found the shot he wanted. He dumped the rest of them into Zatopek’s lap. His assistant raised an eyebrow and started putting them back in order.

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‘Here,’ said Martinique. He tapped a circled area with the tip of his pen. ‘Do you see anything out of the ordinary?’

‘It looks as though a meteorite strike took a bite out of the mountain,’ said the Doctor.

‘That’s right,’ said Martinique, a little surprised. ‘Revealing a complex substratum.’

The Doctor picked up the photo and held it up to his nose.

After a moment he took out his bifocals and slipped them on.

Chris leant over for a better look, his head almost resting on the Doctor’s shoulder.

Beyond a certain point, he knew, computer image enhancement merged into metaphysics. But the line down the side of Artemis Mons, if it was real and not some binary artefact, could only be artificial.

When the Doctor lowered the photo, everyone was looking at them expectantly. Iaomnet had paused with a forkful of fish halfway to her mouth.

‘Disneyland,’ said the Doctor.

‘Where’s that?’ said Iaomnet.

The Doctor just handed the photo back and picked up a sushi roll in his chopsticks.

‘There’s something artificial under the surface of the mountain,’ said Chris. ‘Some kind of hidden base?’

‘A military listening post?’ said Iaomnet.

‘If it were,’ said Martinique, ‘I’m sure we’d have been refused permission to visit. No, this is something much older. It is not only artificial – it is an *artefact*.’

‘How old is that thing?’ said Iaomnet.

‘Quite a find,’ said Martinique. ‘Quite a find.’ He beamed at Iaomnet. ‘Material for a remarkable dissertation, wouldn’t you say?’

The internal cabin doors were designed to withstand vacuum.

Chris had to shuffle around with the tray until he could press the door chime with his elbow. It took the Ogrons a whole minute to answer.

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One of them stared at Chris through the open door. ‘Hi,’ said the Adjudicator. ‘I didn’t know whether you guys were going to the galley, but I thought you might like this.’

The Ogron’s gaze lowered slightly until he was looking at the tray Chris was holding. The eyes were nearly hidden under a narrow, protruding ridge of bone, the naked skull sloping up and back to where straw-coloured, limp hair hung down at the back of the head.

The Ogrons had come with the ship, like a couple of appliances. They’d accepted the sudden change in the crew and destination without question. Martinique had fussed over the cargo, delaying their departure for a nail-biting quarter of an hour, and the Ogrons had just done whatever they were told.

Chris could see the other Ogron lurking in the cabin, watching him. Another pair of squinting, mistrustful eyes. ‘Er,’ he said, ‘I looked up some Ogron recipes in the database. I’m not much of a chef – I hope I got it right.’

After a moment, the Ogron stepped back. Chris decided that was an invitation, and stepped into the cabin.

The Ogrons just stood there. They tended to do that, the Xenoculture course had taught, if you didn’t give them an order or some other reason to act. They’d been the same while they’d been loading the cargo hold. Like robots.

The blank stare was rather unnerving. ‘Um, could you pull the table down?’ Chris asked.

Right away, the Ogron who had opened the door unlocked the table and folded it down from the wall. Chris gratefully put down the heavy tray.

‘OK,’ he said, ‘I had to improvise a bit, but the database suggested some substitutes. This is mostly raw mutton and a little bit of ice to keep the temperature down, some rock salt, some geranium leaves and some basil.’

The Ogron who had opened the door shuffled up to the table.

He scooped up a handful of meat and sniffed at it. Then he pushed it into his mouth and chewed, hard, muscles bulging beneath his jaw.

‘My name’s Chris,’ said Chris.

The Ogron eyed him for a moment. ‘Good food,’ he said. His voice was deep and throaty. He made a sound like coughing, deep in his chest, and the other Ogron joined him at the table.

Chris hovered, but the Ogrons paid him no attention, shovelling mutton into their mouths, occasionally taking a pinch of one of the flavourings between thick fingers.

‘Well,’ he said after a bit, ‘I guess I should leave you to it.’

‘Good food,’ said the Ogron. He scooped up a handful of meat, took Chris’s hand, and plopped the raw mutton into the human’s palm. ‘Try some of this.’

Chris looked at the meat, the juices starting to leak on to his fingers. ‘Er,’ he said.

The silverware on the tray rattled. Chris glanced at it. The Ogrons were looking at one another, chunky teeth showing in their leathery faces.

Chris started to laugh. He put the handful of flesh back down on the tray. ‘Thanks, but I already ate.’

The Ogrons laughed louder, the cutlery rattling harder with the force of it. Chris hoped they weren’t trading rude comments about him in

those deep rumbles.

‘I am Son of My Father,’ said the Ogron. He picked up the stray handful of meat and gulped it down.

‘I am his Sister’s Son,’ said the other.

‘Great, hi,’ said Chris. ‘Listen, how much did Professor Martinique tell you guys about this expedition?’

‘He did not tell us much,’ said the Ogron. ‘He told us to lift and carry his boxes and things.’

‘Did he tell you about the crater? The base hidden under the rock?’

‘He did not tell us,’ said Son of My Father. ‘But we heard him talking to Zatopek about the crater. He does not know very much about it.’

Chris nodded. ‘Never mind. I figured you guys might know something he wasn’t telling us… like what’s really hidden inside that mountain.’

The Ogron hesitated, glancing at his nephew. He raised a dark hand, gesturing Chris closer.

He put his mouth close to Chris’s ear and whispered, ‘I don’t know.’

The cutlery started rattling again.

Later, Chris took the tray back to the galley. Iaomnet and Zatopek stopped talking the instant they saw him, and glared at the table. ‘Good night,’ he said, quickly stacking the tray in the cleaner.

‘See you in the morning,’ said Iaomnet as he retreated.

Chris really wanted to stretch his legs, but the Hopper didn’t even have a gym. He could run in circles around the cargo bay, but it just seemed pointless. He went back down the corridor to the bridge.

The Doctor was sitting in one of the chairs, his face lit in slow-moving patterns by the telltales. The view through the front window was blackness marked with rainbow streaks. Chris tried to ignore it – hyperspace did strange things to your eyes as they tried to focus, and it always made his head ache. The Doctor was watching it as though it was a particularly interesting television programme.

‘I think there’s a lover’s tiff going on in the galley,’ murmured Chris, turning one of the chairs backward and sitting in it. He leant over the back of the seat. ‘Iaomnet and Zatopek.’

‘Or a professional disagreement, perhaps?’ The Doctor raised an eyebrow. ‘The geologists appear to have neglected to fill their assistant in on all the details of the mission.’

‘I was right, wasn’t I? Those images were military. Probably classified.’

‘Of course. Most likely, they’re from Mei Feng’s original expedition.’

‘I can’t believe the military would miss the significance of that line down the mountain.’

‘Maybe they didn’t bother to examine it,’ said the Doctor.

‘Then why take the picture in the first place?’ Chris said.

‘Besides, after what happened to the first expedition, you think they’d be looking for an explanation.’

‘Good point.’ The Doctor drummed his fingers on his mouth, thinking. ‘I wonder if someone pulled a few strings, and this is the first expedition to get permission…’

Chris insisted, ‘Even if it was low-level security info, there’s no way that a couple of university geologists could have gotten their hands on it. Who are these people?’

‘Good question,’ said the Doctor. ‘Though at this point I think we’d be a little hypocritical to complain that they weren’t who they say they are.’

Chris spent the next morning helping Zatopek work on the sensor array. The young academic monitored the links from a palmtop while Chris and the Ogrons unpacked huge antennae and scanner dishes from their plastic crates.

After lunch, Chris crawled out through the airlock and spent an hour welding things together on the hull. Zatopek watched through Chris’s suit camera, giving him terse instructions.

Back inside, he’d showered off the sweat, his elbows knocking against the walls of the tiny cubicle in his cabin. Feeling pleasantly scrubbed,

he wandered up to the bridge. The smart systems were quite capable of handling the entire trip from one Clytemnestran moon to the other, assuming it was all routine; they needed a human pilot only to handle the last stages of the journey, where there'd be no automatic beacons to guide the ship in.

But it didn't hurt to run your eyes over the controls every so often. Chris had heard of a ship on the Earth–Titan run which had got so nervous about one of its retros that it changed course for the nearest repair station, and the crew didn't even realize until they were halfway to Mars.

The door behind him slid open and Iaomnet came on to the bridge. Maybe she'd heard the same story. 'What is that noise?'

she asked, and sat down in the co-pilot's position.

'The Communards,' said Chris.

'Who are they when they're not strangling cats?'

Chris passed her the cassette case. She turned it over in her hands. He noticed her frown when she pressed her thumb against the list of artists on the back and nothing happened.

'Old technology,' he said. 'There's no display encoded into the plastic.'

'Twenty-first century?' she asked.

'Close,' said Chris. 'Twentieth. I'm impressed.'

'I know you've heard different,' said Iaomnet. 'But us students do occasionally learn things. Albeit during brief gaps between hangovers. I did pre-Diaspora history as an elective. It was that or Earth Reptile aesthetics.' She looked around the cockpit. 'So where have you hidden your "tape deck"?'

Chris showed her where he'd used a universal connector to plug his Walkman into the navigation console. She asked him if it was really safe to do that.

'Sure,' he said. 'I've done it thousands of times.' He made sure he was looking straight into her eyes when he said it. She had deep black eyes.

She looked away first, glancing down at the artist list on the back of the cassette case.

'You like this stuff?' she asked.

'It reminds me of someone I used to know,' said Chris. 'They used to play this at the clubs we went to.'

'Way back when in your wild and frivolous youth, right?'

'Right.'

'How old are you?'

'How old do you think I am?'

'Older than you look.'

Chris couldn't help himself – he had to laugh. 'You are absolutely the *first* person who has ever said that to me.'

'There has to be a first time for everything,' said Iaomnet.

'Funny, that's what he said.'

'Your friend?'

'Right,' said Chris, remembering steamy windows.

'Hey,' she said, holding up the cassette case. 'I know this one –

Sting. Didn't he go on to found a religion?'

'That was Prince,' said Chris. 'Sting went into politics. I think he was assassinated in the early twenty-first.'

An alarm sounded and every proximity alert on the navigation display lit up simultaneously. Chris checked: the sensors were registering two unidentified emission sources within forty 85

thousand kilometres on a possible interception vector. He tapped his throat mike. 'Doctor, I think you'd better get in here.'

He flicked the navigation computer over to *anticipate*, relieved to see that it was at least smart enough to realize he meant the fast-moving bogies and not a moon or other fixed navigation point. The display showed the possible course of the bogies as a series of nested cones – a

rough estimate of where they *could* be in the near future.

Chris wasn't surprised to see that the Hopper was right on the centre line of the innermost cone – definitely an interception course. He glanced at Iaomnet, who was frowning at the screen.

When she realized he was looking she asked him what was going on.

'I think we're going to be buzzed,' said Chris.

The Doctor arrived on the bridge with Martinique and Emil close behind. 'What have you got?' he asked.

'Two unidentified bogies on an intercept course,' said Chris.

'They're decelerating at irregular intervals, the maximum deceleration being thirty gees.'

'What do you think they are?' asked the Doctor.

'Well,' said Chris, 'they're small enough not to occlude any stars and they've got very shallow emission signatures. The random deceleration is a typical military-style approach. At a guess I'd say they were a pair of Whirlwinds.'

'Fighters?' asked Zatopek.

Chris punched up another tactical display. 'From the *Victoria*,'

he said, 'a carrier in orbit around Orestes.'

Emil said, 'What do they want with us?'

'Let's hope it isn't target practice,' said the Doctor. 'What kind of weapons package will they have?'

Chris tried to remember his model-building days. 'Assuming they're loaded for space intercept, four ASDAC missiles for high delta V, two Roscoes for low V and a proton cannon for knife work.'

'Which means?' asked the Doctor patiently.

'If they drop within a delta-V range of about twenty kps we're probably all right.'

'Unless they use their cannons,' said Iaomnet.

‘If they’re intercepting us,’ said Zatopek, ‘why are they slowing down?’

‘Space combat isn’t like dogfighting a flitter,’ said the Doctor.

‘There’s no point arriving at your target and then zipping past it.

You’ve got to be slow enough, relative to your target, for your weapons to hit it.’

It was more complicated than that, Chris knew. The high-V

weapons like the ASDACs traded off warhead for engine size. If you launched while on an intercept vector they could rip apart a ship just with the kinetic energy of their impact, much less effective at low or negative closure.

The low-V missiles like the Roscoes traded the other way: big warhead for a proximity hit, but the engine was smaller. Each weapon had its own effective envelope based on the absolute distance from launch to target and the relative velocity. The fighters were on a relatively simple intercept from behind and above, simple enough for even the Hopper’s navigation computer to make the necessary calculations.

The fighters were closing at less than seventy kilometres per second. Too late, Chris reckoned, for them to bother with their ASDACs. Once they were below twenty kilometres per second they would be at minimum effective V for the Roscoes. Which would mean that they were going for a visual inspection and a little bit of cursory intimidation.

Unless they used their proton cannons. In which case the Hopper didn’t stand a chance.

‘Chris,’ said the Doctor, ‘I think you should stop broadcasting Jimmy Somerville now – we don’t want to get them annoyed.’

Chris winced and unplugged the Walkman from the navigation console, which immediately began to bleep at him. He’d forgotten all about it.

Iaomnet turned to the Doctor. ‘If this is just an inspection, why haven’t they hailed us?’

‘They probably wondered who was strangling the cat,’ said the Doctor.

Chris flipped a switch and the bleeping stopped. ‘Hello, unidentified Hopper,’ said a speaker. ‘Do please reply. We’re becoming a little anxious.’

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Chris tapped a control. ‘Hello there,’ he said. ‘Sorry to keep you waiting, we had a minor communications glitch.’

‘Not a problem, unidentified Hopper, we were enjoying the music. This is the interceptor *Albert Edward*, out of the ISN

Victoria. Could we please have your ident code?’

‘Yes, ma’am. We’re an intersystem Hopper out of Earth, bound for Iphigenia, Ident X181/481.’

‘And so you are. Many thanks for your assistance, and a safe journey.’

‘And you. Thanks.’ Chris closed the link.

Everyone in the cockpit let out the breath they’d been holding.

The Hopper slid into orbit around Iphigenia at 07.00 hours, ship’s time, a tiny dot swinging around Clytemnestra’s innermost moon. The gas giant was a massive, faintly glowing ball, cutting off the sunlight, filling the bridge with soft reddish shadows.

Chris and Iaomnet were sitting side by side. She was keeping an eye on navigation while he watched the sensor array. Zatopek had given him a series of diagnostics to run, comparing the close-range data with the long-range scans they’d done en route. Two days’ worth of recordings, all of the wrong side of the planetoid, Aulis Crater tantalizingly hidden on the other side.

It was all checking out perfectly, a detailed map of the surface slowly unscrolling in the computer’s memory. ‘Ten minutes to Aulis Crater,’ said Iaomnet.

‘So,’ said Chris, ‘what do you reckon we’re going to find down there?’

‘I don’t know,’ she said. ‘I thought I was just here to make sure the academics didn’t fall out of an airlock or something. But an ancient, alien construct… There might be a whole city under there.’

Chris ran his eyes over the controls. Something was trying to get his attention. Had he missed a telltale? ‘Hidden under the mountain all

this time,' he said. 'For millions of years, maybe.

And we'll be the first people to visit it.'

'Great,' said Iaomnet. 'I hate places with too many tourists. I just hope nobody's home.'

'Do you travel a lot?'

'Not much, no,' she said. 'The truth is, I –' From somewhere aft there came shouts, followed by an appalling, high-pitched scream. 'Shit!'

'Stay here,' said Chris, jumping up. He almost collided with the Doctor, who dashed in through the doorway.

'It's Zatopek,' said the Time Lord. 'Give me your personal stereo.'

'What?' said Iaomnet, unable to take her eyes off the controls.

Chris didn't hesitate, snatching the Walkman out of its socket in the console. Kim Wilde vanished in a puff of silence. The Doctor took the Walkman and grabbed Chris's bag of tapes and bolted.

Chris followed him. In the galley, Zatopek was in convulsions, lying on the table and screaming in Czech. Martinique was trying to hold him down, grabbing at his head as it smacked against the plastic.

'I'm burning!' Zatopek shrieked. His dark hair was in disarray, like a black halo. 'Sailing in the lake of fire!'

The Doctor was frantically fiddling with the Walkman. 'What's wrong with him?' said Chris.

'Get us out of this orbit,' said the Doctor.

'Planets emerging born out of the red sear in the lake, crawling above!' yelled Zatopek.

'Higher up?' asked Chris.

'No. Just get us into an orbit which doesn't cross the crater.'

The Doctor shrugged as though something was irritating him, and a tiny drop of blood ran out of his nose. ' *Now*, Chris.'

‘Right away.’ Chris turned and ran back to the bridge. Iaomnet was waiting. ‘What’s up?’

Chris flung himself into the seat next to her. ‘We’ve got to change orbit,’ he said. The acceleration plucked at them as they turned. ‘What’s the problem, Chris? Who screamed?’

‘Zatopek,’ said Chris. ‘I think it’s some kind of psychic attack.

Have you ever seen anything like that?’

‘No, this is my first –’ said Iaomnet. ‘No, I haven’t. Emil didn’t tell me he was Gifted.’

Another yell came from aft. ‘Merry Christmas, Emil,’ said Chris.

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Half an hour later, the crew were gathered around the stricken psi. Zatopek was lying on the kitchen table, half covered by a first-aid blanket. He was murmuring about tacking across the wave of oblivion, hot chaos licking at the hull of his boat, and yelling at his neighbour to turn the noise down.

‘This is terrible,’ said Martinique. ‘This is terrifying.’ He looked at the device attached to his assistant’s head. ‘What is this, exactly?’

‘I’ve used one of Chris’s tapes to create a loop that will create interference in his neural pathways and reduce the intensity of the signal he’s receiving,’ said the Doctor.

‘He doesn’t look very happy,’ said Iaomnet.

‘For this to work, the noise has to be fairly radical.’

Chris picked up the remains of his cassette. ‘Not “Don’t Leave Me This Way”?’

The Doctor shook his head. ‘It’s a powerful source and we’re still very close. I’m afraid I had to take drastic measures: Frankie Goes To Hollywood.’

‘“Relax” or “Two Tribes”?’

‘“Relax”,’ said the Doctor. ‘The psycho buffer remix.’

‘Ship’s engineer, huh?’ said Iaomnet.

‘Could you take him to his quarters?’ the Doctor asked her and Martinique. ‘I think it’s safe to move him now, and he needs a serious lie down.’

Chris watched as their passengers scooped up the muttering Zatopek and carted him out. ‘What about you?’ he asked, when they were gone.

The Doctor blew his nose. ‘I’m fine. There’s a powerful psychic signal emanating from Iphigenia – presumably from whatever’s under Aulis Crater. The signal is much weaker here.

I’m able to filter out the random interference to a considerable extent.’

‘What is the signal?’ asked Chris. ‘A message? Some kind of defence mechanism – like a *telepaths keep out* sign?’

‘I think it’s more in the nature of a leak. What’s down there is very, very old, possibly damaged or worn down… A tiny amount of its power must be escaping.’

‘Psychic pollution. So now what?’ said Chris.

‘We go back,’ said the Doctor. ‘And we land.’

Iaomnet slid Zatopek’s wallet out of his jacket pocket and flipped through it. Chris had the impression she’d done this before.

‘Land? Down there?’ said Martinique. He was sitting beside the bed, anxiously watching his assistant. The telepath was half asleep, eyelids flickering, lips moving. The four of them barely fitted into Zatopek’s cabin.

‘Surely that’s far too dangerous,’ Martinique insisted. ‘I’m not even sure if we should stay in orbit.’

Chris said, ‘But you’ve come all this way. Shouldn’t you at least find out what’s down there?’

‘No registration,’ said Iaomnet. ‘Either he left his institute ident at home, or he’s a Wild Card.’ She looked at Martinique. ‘Did you know he was a psi?’

‘Of course not,’ said the grey-haired professor. ‘I was as surprised as any of you by the… attack he experienced.’

Iaomnet tucked the wallet back in Zatopek's pocket. 'Well, there's something going on here which I don't like,' she said,

'and I don't think we should proceed until we get some clarification.'

'But we can't abandon the mission now.'

'I thought you said you didn't want to land.'

'I'm not sure,' said the professor, glancing at his assistant. 'I don't know. He might need proper medical attention.'

'Exactly. I say we go home.'

'Well,' said Martinique, 'you're not in command of this mission.'

'No,' said Iaomnet, 'but what's the point of getting ourselves killed? How am I going to write that dissertation if I get fried?'

'We land,' said Zatopek.

They all looked down at him. He reached up and pushed one of the headphones away from his ear, the music spilling out in a recurring tinny hiss. 'I will be able to create a barrier in my mind, with a little work,' he said hoarsely. 'I was taken unawares. But once I am ready, we must return to the crater.'

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Martinique looked down at the younger man. 'Are you sure about this?' he said. 'Whatever's down there –'

'We land,' insisted Zatopek, his voice heavy with some emotion Chris couldn't identify. 'We must discover the source of the power. There will be nothing more important we could do in our entire lives, Henri.' He looked at Chris. 'How long before we can return?'

The Adjudicator said, 'How long before you're ready?'

Iaomnet picked out the landing site, a smooth rock shelf close to the summit of Artemis Mons. Much too smooth. As the Hopper softly lowered itself, Zatopek and the Doctor peered out of the cockpit window. Gazing into the shadowy cleft in the mountainside where the meteorite had torn through Artemis, trying to see the skull beneath her skin.

Chris obligingly switched on one of the vehicle's floodlights.

The beam stabbed into the gash. After a moment, their eyes adjusted.

There was a gentle bump as the Hopper's landing feet pressed against rock. Iaomnet shut down the engines. There was a moment of ringing quiet, that constant background noise absent for the first time in days.

No one noticed. They were all staring at the doors inside the mountain, the structures and shapes exposed to space when the rock had been torn away.

After a few minutes, Martinique said, 'All right.' His voice quivered. 'Emil, Iaomnet, would you please accompany me to the airlock, where we'll suit up for EVA.'

'I think I'd better come with you,' said the Doctor. 'After what happened earlier, you may need a doctor.'

'He has a point,' said Iaomnet. 'I'd feel a lot better if he came with us.'

'The more, the merrier,' said Martinique. Zatopek opened his mouth to protest, but the professor went on, 'And hopefully the safer. Are you qualified for an EVA, Doctor?'

The Doctor grinned. ‘I’m qualified in everything except HTML

markup and dentistry. Chris, what are our Ogron friends up to?’

‘They’re in their quarters, as always,’ said Chris. ‘Probably playing ludo.’

‘All right. We’ll be on the surface in fifteen minutes. Get ready to track us.’

‘Right.’ Chris turned back to the controls.

A few minutes later, he heard the Doctor say, ‘Testing, testing.

Who can hear me?’

‘I can,’ said Martinique.

Iaomnet: ‘Me too.’

Zatopek: ‘Yes.’

Chris told them, ‘Everyone’s coming through nice and clearly.

I’ve got your vital signs on my board… now. Take it easy out there, don’t try to see everything at once.’

They moved through the airlock, then out in front of the Hopper. Chris saw Iaomnet was carrying a double-barrelled plasma thrower, the least subtle weapon in the ship’s small armoury. The Doctor gave Chris a cheery wave, and the four suited figures headed in the direction of the gash, bouncing slowly in the moon’s gravity.

Ten minutes passed. Chris watched the vital-signs monitors, making sure that all of the suits were functioning properly. He could monitor their oxygen levels, their heart rates, the lot, and he’d made sure each of them knew it. Not to make them feel safer. So that they knew that he’d know if anyone did anything they shouldn’t.

‘Who can hear me?’ said the Doctor.

‘I can,’ said Zatopek. There was a pause. Chris held his peace.

‘You’ve isolated our communications, Doctor?’ said the geologist.

‘Yes. Now would be a good time to tell me what you know, don’t you think?’

Zatopek didn’t answer right away. Eventually he said, ‘Can you imagine what life is like as an unregistered psychokinetic?’

‘I’m sure you can,’ said the Doctor.

‘All that *suspicion*. Always suspecting and being suspected. Is this new friend I have made really an agent of the Institute for the Gifted? Is that telepath wearing the institute’s symbol probing my mind even as I walk past? Remember to let the coffee cup fall 93

when you drop it, remember to use your hands to smooth your hair. So difficult to live with the secret.’

‘So dangerous,’ said the Doctor. ‘Especially here, where our lives depend on one another. Even if you’re not a telepath per se, you’re vulnerable to the psychic leakage. I saved you once, Emil, but what if I can’t do it again? Tell me why you’re really here.’

‘Are you threatening me?’

‘Don’t be ridiculous. I’m asking you to show some common sense. The others don’t need to know.’

‘You already know too much about me,’ said Zatopek. ‘I can trust Martinique, and Iaomnet’s grade depends on our good report. But how can I ensure you don’t inform the authorities of my wild talent?’

‘Now it sounds like you’re threatening me.’

‘You’re right, Doctor. We do have to trust one another.’

Silence. Chris saw the telltales shift as the Doctor opened his comm channels up again. ‘– extraordinary!’ Martinique was saying. ‘And it’s the age of the find that’s the most significant thing. The crater was built to hide those structures, I’m sure of it.

What civilization visited this dead moon, ten million years ago?

What did they build here, and why?’

‘Are we going inside it?’ asked Iaomnet, sounding as though she’d rather snort a gecko.

‘Of course we’re going inside it,’ said Martinique. Chris imagined the

man's eyes shining inside his helmet. 'Just a small sortie at first. No more than a few hours.'

Chris said, 'I won't be able to track your vital signs and communications once you're shielded by the rock.'

'Then we'll have to be careful,' said Martinique.

'Very careful,' said Zatopek.

'Very very careful,' said Iaomnet.

'Very careful indeed,' said the Doctor.

Chris watched their progress on his monitors for another hour, peeking through the Doctor's binocs from time to time. The party was heading for a big blue rectangle that stood out from the other shapes. It looked a lot like a door.

94

Chris switched to the Doctor's suit camera when the group got close enough. 'It's an airlock,' said the Time Lord. 'The shape and size suggests a humanoid species.'

Martinique said, 'How do you know it's an airlock?'

Iaomnet lifted her plasma thrower. 'Knock knock,' she said.

'Hang on a moment,' said the Doctor. The airlock loomed on Chris's screen. Suddenly the picture was filled with steam.

'Doctor!' said Chris. 'Are you all right?'

'Of course,' said the Doctor. 'Just dust and some very, very old air escaping. The airlock is easy to open from the outside. You'd hardly want to design one that was hard to get into…'

'Unless you were a military installation,' said Martinique, 'and you didn't want visitors.'

'On the other hand,' said the Doctor, 'this particular door was hidden by tons of rock.'

'So we still don't know what we're going to find,' said Iaomnet.

The Doctor's point of view shifted, taking in Zatopek's helmet for a

moment. ‘There is,’ he said, ‘as the saying goes, only one way to find out.’

The Doctor and company had been out of contact for two hours.

Chris was sick of playing video games. He decided to go and see what Son of My Father and Sister Son were up to.

The Ogrons were jogging in circles around the cargo bay. Part of the small space was taken up with sensor equipment, but the rest was neatly stacked packaging, collapsed into flat squares.

Chris sat down on an unopened crate, watching the Ogrons for a while. Son of My Father saw him and raised a hairy hand, but they kept jogging, relentlessly, the metal plates of the floor rattling under their feet.

Chris shrugged, took off his jacket, and joined them.

The pointless movement took the edge off his nerves. He wiped sweat from his face as he followed the Ogrons around. No one told them what was going on around them. Did they run because they were nervous? Or were they just burning off excess energy?

At last all of them stopped, leaning against the wall and the crates as they got their breath back. Even Ogrons get out of breath, Chris realized. It made them seem more human. Well, it *did* – it was something familiar.

Son of My Father clapped a meaty hand on Chris’s shoulder.

‘You a regular guy,’ he said. ‘You got to watch out for the people on this ship, Chris. Sometimes bad rocks fool you: look like good rocks on the outside.’

Chris nodded. ‘Thanks. I’ve already worked out that Iaomnet’s not a student. Or not just a student, anyway. She’s probably a double-eye.’

Son of My Father shook his head. 'Not what I mean.’

‘Well,’ said Chris, ‘Zatopek has kind of given himself away as well.’

‘Not what I mean either. Watch out.’

Chris stood up. ‘Is the Doctor in danger?’

Son of My Father just shrugged.

Four hours. Chris couldn't settle. The Ogrons had gone back into their quarters, but he kept wandering around the ship. He tried jogging for a while, but it just made him feel lightheaded.

He ran a dozen diagnostics on the Hopper's systems, checking for sabotage, then irregularities, then anything out of the ordinary. He found a few modifications in the drive system, and remembered with a surprisingly guilty start that they'd pinched the ship.

Four and a half hours. He cooked some chicken soup in the galley, but didn't want it. He tried to grab a nap, but couldn't, lying in his quarters waiting for the bridge computer to tell him the Doctor was back in radio range.

Eventually he tried so hard to go to sleep that he dropped off from exhaustion.

He felt the dream come down like a terrible weight on his chest, like a tornado blowing through the tiny cabin. He tried to open his eyes, grabbing at the lids with his fingers, and somehow opened them, but the dream didn't stop, slithering out from under the bed.

Slithering. Green eyes, watching.

96

Chris stumbled across the cabin and smacked into the opposite wall. 'Go away!' he yelled. 'I'm *awake*!'

A voice came hissing out of the dream's scaly face. 'Can't you feel it?' it insisted. 'It's all changing. Changing all around you.'

There wasn't much stuff in the cabin, but it was blowing around as though the hull had been punctured. 'Shit!' shouted Chris. 'What's happening?'

'Don't you feel it?' said the dream.

'Yeah,' said Chris. 'The Doctor.'

He stumbled across the room, the wind trying to knock him over, the dream trying to curl itself around his legs.

There was no sign of the Ogrons. Chris thought of hammering on their door, but the wind pushed him away, down the narrow corridor,

down to the airlock.

Somewhere out there, he knew, the Doctor was at the green eye of the storm. Oh God, this wasn't a dream: something real was happening. Somewhere out there, deep in Artemis's belly.

They'd gone under her skin, seen what they shouldn't have seen, and now they were being chased across the mountain by ravening dreams like dogs let off the leash.

Chris bent over, hands pressed against his knees, gasping for breath. The images were just blowing through him, on their way to nowhere.

He pulled on the spacesuit, his pale hands appearing like insects from the ends of the fat sleeves. He shook as he tugged on and locked the gloves. He had to get out there, push into the storm, find the Doctor and pull him free.

Did he need to? He watched his hand disappear into the glove.

Wouldn't the Doctor just shed his skin again? Wouldn't he just let the storm burn him, burn his skin away, and crawl out of the mountain laughing?

All those skins, torn loose and blown away in the wind, all those different faces, sailing past him, glimpses of faces smiling or serious, but all of them the Doctor. Shedding his skin, his skins, shattered like a dropped cup.

One of the skins blew right up to Chris, flapping against him like an escaped newspaper. He beat it away before it could wrap itself around him, and it went blowing away, one of hundreds.

97

Chris pulled on the helmet, snapped it in place and turned on the internal environment. Instantly he was gasping, sparkles exploding in front of his eyes. The terrible weight pushed against his chest as he struggled with the helmet.

The dream crawled out of its resting place in the suit, looming in his helmet, its lethal eyes an inch from his. He shrieked, his own voice shrilling in his ears.

The sound changed, suddenly, and he realized the helmet was off and he could breathe again. Son of My Father was looking at him.

‘Bad air,’ said the Ogron. ‘You must be careful and check the air.’

‘Yes,’ Chris wheezed. He was sitting on the floor of the airlock, leaning against the wall at an awkward angle, the oxygen pack propping him up. He rolled, face down on the floor.

Son of My Father looked at the indicators. ‘No air,’ he said.

‘Not even bad air. Someone forgot to get this suit ready.’

Chris shook his head. His hair was plastered to his face. He pushed at it, clumsy in his gloves. ‘Someone must have disabled the safeties. I’ll bet you anything the other suits are the same.’

Son of My Father crouched beside him. ‘Good Ogron,’ he said,

‘good Chris. You stay here in the ship.’

‘Jeez,’ said Chris. ‘If they wanted me to stay, they only had to *ask*.’

An hour later the control board lit up with vital signs. Two sets of signs, one of them rapid with panic, the other wildly erratic.

Chris took a deep breath and said, ‘Can you hear me? What’s your condition?’ Nothing. ‘Do you require assistance?’ Nothing.

Not like he could give any. He’d tried repairing one of the sabotaged suits, working from the manual, but it was going to take hours.

‘– God’s sake say something! Can’t you hear me?’ yelled Martinique.

‘Relax, Professor, I can hear you fine.’ He’d probably only just remembered which button to press. ‘What’s your status?’

‘Dead!’ gasped Martinique. ‘Zatopek’s dead. Send the Ogrons.

I’m carrying the Doctor. I’m exhausted.’

Chris glanced at the second set of wavering vital signs. ‘Slow down, Professor. What happened to the Doctor? Where’s Iaomnet?’

‘I don’t know. I don’t know what the hell happened to us. It all just blew up in our faces. We have to get out of here. Send the Ogrons.’

‘I can’t, Professor. All of the spare HE suits have been sabotaged.’

‘You’re lying.’ The academic was breathing hard as he dragged the Doctor along. ‘You just don’t want to help us, and your *friend* is *dying*!’

Chris made himself speak slowly and clearly. ‘What happened to him?’

‘The same thing that happened to Zatopek on the ship,’ said Martinique. ‘But a thousand times worse. A million times worse.’

‘Cassandra,’ breathed the Doctor.

Chris almost jumped at the sound of his voice, suddenly filling the bridge. ‘What is it, Doctor?’

‘Cassandra. Right now. Right away.’

Chris was about to ask who Cassandra was when he remembered. The outermost planet in the system. A week’s journey away.

‘We have to go there now, Chris.’ The Doctor’s voice was fading. ‘No choice. Get ready to leave.’

Behind Chris, Son of My Father made a noise deep in his chest.

Chris started, turned to look at the Ogron.

‘Bad rock,’ said Son of My Father.

99

Meanwhile

Kibero Patera, Io – 15 February 2982

‘Shall we play a game?’ asked Mr Fiction.

Thandiwe thought for a moment. ‘No,’ she said. ‘I want to learn something.’

‘Oh no,’ said Mr Fact and tried to scuttle under Thandiwe’s bed.

Mr Fiction pointed to where Mr Fact’s black shiny bottom stuck out from under the counterpane, his rear pair of legs scrabbling for purchase on the varnished floor. ‘Doesn’t he look funny?’ he said, and laughed.

Some of Thandiwe's other toys joined in, especially the Fat Monster Eater. The Fat Monster Eater was a big floppy bag as big across as Thandiwe was tall and covered in fur. It had a big jolly mouth and rolling eyes and laughed at everything. Which annoyed Thandiwe sometimes, except late at night when the Monster Under the Bed was lurking in the dark.

When that happened, the Fat Monster Eater would leap into the bed with her, and chuckle softly until she went to sleep. It used to tell her stories as well, but then Mama gave her Mr Fiction, who was much smarter and knew every single story ever told – even the grown-up ones.

At first she'd been worried that the Fat Monster Eater would be jealous, but when she asked her sister about it, Gugwani had told her not to be silly. 'They're just bots,' she said. 'They don't feel anything.'

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Which had made Thandiwe feel all strange and upset all that afternoon until she unexpectedly started crying at dinner – when Mama found out why she spoke to Gugwani in her very quiet voice, which meant that she was really *really* angry.

Then she took Thandiwe aside and told her that although it was true that the Fat Monster Eater, Mr Fiction and Mr Fact were robots, they were very clever robots who had been – she used a long word which Thandiwe didn't understand – to have feelings.

Mama said that as soon as the robots had seen Thandiwe they had fallen instantly in love with her. And that was the real reason the Fat Monster Eater wasn't jealous because, when you really love someone, then their happiness is the most important thing in your life.

Thandiwe thought this over later that night and decided it sort of made sense. It was certainly true that when her mama was angry everyone seemed upset and when she was happy everyone was pleased – especially the servants. Perhaps that's what she meant. However, she still let the Fat Monster Eater sleep in her bed as well as Mr Fiction, just so he wouldn't feel left out – it was only fair after all.

Gugwani sulked for a whole week until Mama bought her a new dress.

If anyone came out worse in the end it was Mr Fact, as the Fat Monster Eater always seemed to side with Mr Fiction when it came to disputes – as it did when Thandiwe wanted to do something naughty

and the arachnoid (which meant spider shaped) robot tried to hide under the bed.

'I want to learn something *interesting*,' said Thandiwe.

'I'm not coming out!' squeaked Mr Fact.

'I'll say the words,' said Thandiwe.

'You shouldn't *know* the words,' said Mr Fact. 'It's naughty for you to even know words like that.'

' *Double, double, toil and trouble*,' said Thandiwe, ' *Fire burn and cauldron bubble.* '

Mr Fact stopped talking and went completely still. Thandiwe ordered him to back up and turn around to face her. 'Now open your head.' Mr Fact obeyed, the top of his head hinging backward to reveal the machines inside. He couldn't speak once 101

the words were said but his eight eyes always looked at her reproachfully.

Thandiwe had learnt the words by eavesdropping on a tech when she came to fix Mr Fact's head after it had got caught in the bedroom door. It had been amazing how many times Thandiwe had had to slam the door on poor Mr Fact's head before something had broken. She knew that there were other words, key phrases that would allow her to access the deeper structures of the robot's brain, but as yet she hadn't figured out a plan to get them.

Still, the words she had were enough to override some of the security protocols, especially if she reached in and flipped the microswitch just behind the third eye stalk. A simscreen unfolded out of the open top of Mr Fact's skull and displayed a menu made up of half a dozen mikons. As usual the most active mikon was the one that terminated Mr Fact's diagnostic mode, sealed up his head and returned him to normal activity. A tiny representation of a spider, it would scuttle around the screen, sometimes even knocking the other mikons out of the way in an attempt to get under Thandiwe's fingertip. Mr Fact didn't like having his head open.

Thandiwe was wise to his tricks though, and feinting with her right hand she touched the sensor mikon with her left index finger. A couple of sub-menus later and she had Mr Fact set up as an ad hoc surveillance device.

‘Who shall we spy on today?’ said Thandiwe. Mr Fiction said nothing but brushed his ears and giggled. Through Mr Fact she had access to every securicam in Kibero, allowing her to look practically anywhere, including all the tiptop secret places that Mama didn’t think she knew about.

Actually, she found the secret places pretty boring. Most of them looked like small offices full of ordinary people talking to each other. Many of them used long incomprehensible words and acronyms that Thandiwe could have asked Mr Fact to translate –

if she hadn’t had to deactivate him to spy in the first place. She quickly learnt that people were far more interesting than places.

And her family the most interesting of all.

‘I want to see what Mama is doing,’ she told the screen.

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The sim phased in a view of her mama’s office. She was looking through one of the cameras up on the wall, she knew.

She tried to imagine she was a bot, crouching up on the wall, listening while her mother talked to a boring-looking man on a screen.

‘We’ve managed to trace her at last,’ he said. ‘Good news, Lady Forrester. We’re now certain she left Fury within two hours of the attack on ICC.’

‘Do you know where she went?’

‘I’m afraid not, My Lady, but we’re working on it. Our best lead is a missing Imperial shuttle, though it had an ISN crew.’

‘Keep me informed,’ said Mama. ‘The moment you know anything, however tenuous, tell me right away.’

‘As always, My Lady.’ The boring-looking man gave a little bow. Mama switched off the screen.

Mama looked at a screen on her desk, and then glanced up at Thandiwe – at the securicam she was looking through.

‘You’re a very naughty child,’ she said, smiling. ‘Put Mr Fact back together at once.’

‘Yes, Mama,’ said Thandiwe, although she wasn’t sure if her mother could hear her.

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3

Cassandra

17 January 2982

‘Unlimited rice pudding,’ said the Doctor.

Iaomnet bent down and checked the medical indicators on the arm of the Doctor’s HE suit. The respiration bar was still green, but the cardiac monitor kept blinking from red to green and back again.

She stared at him through the faceplate. His eyes were open, one looking to the left, the other rolled so far up that she could hardly see the iris. She didn’t think it was a good sign. A good suit would have had proper diagnostic software, but these suits were basic and quite old, a fact that was beginning to seriously worry her.

‘Doctor, can you hear me?’

‘“Boney,” I said, “an army marches on its stomach.”’

Reaching down, Iaomnet once again got a grip on the Doctor’s shoulder straps and started dragging him along. The corridor was an octagonal cross-section, three meters across, lined with some kind of smooth black stone that gleamed in the beam of her suitlights. Ahead it stretched into the darkness, straight and featureless. And behind? Iaomnet had stopped looking behind some time ago.

‘Just routine,’ muttered Iaomnet. ‘Keep an eye on some academics. Just routine.’

The Doctor was beginning to get heavy, even with Iphigenia’s 0.09 gravity. She wished she could remember 104

how far they had walked on the way in. Were they even in the same corridor? And if they made it to the surface – what then?

The suit recycling packs were good for another sixty hours – at a pinch it could utilize everything from her sweat to her urine to keep her breathing. But it was going to get damned uncomfortable.

If Chris and the Hopper were gone then the only option would be the emergency stasis button and the screamer beacon that said,

'I'm dead, come rescue me.' Given that Agamemnon was a rim system and a war zone, that gave a statistical survival probability of sixteen per cent.

Her instructors at Loki had been big on statistics.

And mission priorities. Whatever it was that resided in the central chamber, it was truly alien and powerful in a way that she couldn't understand. And if Martinique was right, there were thousands just like it, scattered throughout the Empire and beyond.

Which made getting the Doctor back a mission priority. Never mind that the Doctor wasn't making a whole lot of sense.

'Balderdash, my dear Professor Blinovitch,' said the Doctor.

'I've met myself dozens of times and I haven't exploded yet.'

Walk for two hours, thought Iaomnet, then rest for ten minutes, then walk for another two hours. It was important to get into a routine early, that way, with any luck, your body might keep going when anoxia started closing down your brain cells.

'Beware the memories of the compassionate tent,' said the Doctor. 'I'll have your eyes for that.'

A little over an hour later they reached the first intersection, a hemispheric chamber with the same featureless corridors leading off in six directions.

'Is it time already?' said the Doctor. 'No, go back to sleep – it's nowhere near time yet.'

Iaomnet dropped him and slumped down against the wall. It didn't make much difference in the low gravity but it made her feel as if she was resting.

'Just because you're paranoid,' said the Doctor, 'doesn't mean they're not out to get you.'

Now that made sense. ‘Doctor?’

105

‘Aspidistra baby!’

She put her faceplate close to his and snapped her head back, when she realized his eyes were focused on hers. ‘Are you feeling better?’

‘Better is a relative term,’ said the Doctor. ‘Better than what?’

‘Better than you were?’

‘How was I?’

‘You were unconscious, talking nonsense, rambling.’

‘Of course I was rambling,’ said the Doctor testily. ‘It’s not easy putting your mind back together after it’s been systematically scrambled by a probability intercession. I’d like to see you do it.’ The Doctor looked around, his movements comically exaggerated by the bulk of his HE suit. ‘Where’s Chris?’

‘We left him on the Hopper – remember?’

‘Of course I remember,’ said the Doctor. ‘I also distinctly remember his being torn to bits by an N-form in Northern England.’ He paused. ‘Or was that me? Got any dice? I need to test my luck.’ The Doctor got to his feet, too fast for the low gravity, and put his gloved hand on Iaomnet’s shoulder to steady himself. ‘Listen,’ he said, ‘I need you to do something for me.’

‘What?’

‘I need you to pretend that you’re my friend. That we have a history together.’

‘Doctor, you’re not making any sense,’ said Iaomnet. ‘What the hell is going on?’

He beamed at her. ‘Good,’ he said. ‘You’re getting the hang of it already. You see, I need someone linear to keep it all together.

It’s very important. The whole thing could collapse.’

‘What whole thing?’

‘The universe, or at least the important bits.’

‘The important bits?’

‘The bit we’re in, for example.’

‘Stop it.’

‘Didn’t we have fun at Bernice’s wedding? I thought Da Vinci’s cake was the high point of the reception, didn’t you? At least try to agree with me, it’s terribly important. If you can’t answer, nod your head.’

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Iaomnet nodded her head.

‘Trust me,’ said the Doctor. ‘There’s madness in my method.

And now we have to get going.’ He pointed down one of the corridors. ‘This way I think.’

Iaomnet blinked. They had stopped.

‘How long have I just been standing here?’ she asked the Doctor.

‘About five minutes,’ he said. He was leaning against the wall of the chamber, a six-sided room. There were bits of scored metal embedded in the dark stuff of the floor, as though some kind of machinery had been ripped free, long ago. ‘You’re all right, it’s just that your brain switched off and let your legs get on with it.

Einstein said you only needed the spine for marching.’

‘Where are we? Do you – do you know where we’re going?’

‘We’re somewhere close to the surface. Don’t give up hope.’

‘They’ve gone. They’ve left us here. They think we’re dead, and even if they didn’t, after that, after that happened, who’d stay here? You’d leave as fast as you could.’

Iaomnet sat down on the floor, cross-legged. After a moment, the Doctor came up and stood over her.

‘What did you see?’ he said.

‘I don’t know.’

‘Come on, Iaomnet. You’re an operative, a trained observer.

You must have seen something.’

‘I don’t know what you’re talking about.’

‘Never mind that. Tell me what you saw in there.’

‘Zatopek had a gun,’ she said. ‘And he said we were going on no matter what you said, and…’ Iaomnet shook her head. She had a weird urge to curl up in a ball, a bulky, awkward ball with fat arms and legs and a head shaped like an, er, ball. ‘Oh God,’

she said. ‘I’m not making sense.’

The Doctor put his faceplate close to hers. His eyebrows were drawn together in a worried frown. ‘Never mind,’ he said.

‘Are we going to get out of here?’ she said.

The Doctor paused. ‘Do you feel that?’ he said.

Iaomnet said, ‘No.’ The Doctor knelt, took her gloved hand, and pressed it, palm down, against the floor.

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She felt the distant vibration. ‘What is it?’ she said. Almost.

Almost but not quite remembering. Remembering the machinery in the central chamber, the way it. Moved. ‘Oh God.’ She snatched her hand away from the floor.

‘It’s our rescue ship landing,’ said the Doctor. ‘Unless I’m very much mistaken.’ She looked up at him. ‘Are you ready for one last stint of walking?’

‘Yes!’ She bounced to her feet. ‘They’ll go without us. We have to move – *now*!’

Roz was already pulling on her suit as the ISN *Wilfred Owen*, Sassoon Class, touched down on the ugly surface of Iphigenia. It was a state-of-the-art All Hostile Environments Garment, skin-tight, elastic and light as a feather, the helmet made of the same stuff as the bodysuit but turned hard and transparent. It was more comfortable than her street clothes.

She felt the big engines shut down, the tremble in the walls quietening, a feeling of weight as the rock gave slightly beneath the shuttle. The two troopers with her, wearing their own AHEGs, waited patiently.

A few moments later, Captain Sekeris's voice came through the suit radio. 'All right, ma'am,' he said. 'Go ahead when you're ready.' The poor man had been acting like a servant ever since she'd managed to convince him she was on a secret mission for the Empress. A real Forrester, right there on his ship, probably working for one of the intelligence agencies to boot. He was young for a captain, eager to do the right thing.

The troopers followed her out of the airlock, a ramp unfolding to take them down to the rocky surface. Each of them carried heavy sensor equipment, the output appearing on a palmtop Roz carried on a strap over her shoulder. 'Still nothing on the ship's sensors, ma'am,' Sekeris told her.

'Stand by,' she said. 'We'll spread out and search the area between the ship and the mountain.'

'What if they went… inside, ma'am?'

'I want to avoid entering the mountain if at all possible. We don't know how deep those structures go. All right, let's go.'

The troopers started walking, one to the right, one to the left.

Roz blew out a sigh and headed for the mountain.

She seriously did not want to go inside. They'd seen the structures half buried in the mountain on their approach, and she had no doubt that it was the real goal of Martinique's expedition.

But whatever was in there had screwed up reality to the point where there were Goddess knew how many extra Doctors walking about, appearing like sad ghosts in a Chinese fairy tale.

Another one had appeared to her in her cabin en route, furiously scribbling coordinates on the wall with a stick of crayon. A short guy in an oversized dark suit. 'Don't tell the Time Lords I was here,' he insisted. 'I keep to myself, one step ahead of them. But only one step.' Then he'd vanished.

At least out here it was just rocks and empty space. You knew where you were with rocks and empty space.

The scream nearly burst her eardrum. '– sake, wait! Don't leave without us! Don't go! Can you hear us?'

'Shut the cruk *up*!' Roz yelled into her suit mike. 'Turn your bloody gain down!'

'Roz, can you hear me?'

'Doctor!' She tried not to sound as delighted as she was. And damn, he'd used her name. Now they knew he knew her. 'What's the sitrep?'

'What are you doing here?' he said.

'Oh, thanks. I came to rescue you.'

'But I thought you were living in Hampstead.'

'What?'

'With George.'

Roz felt something cold worm its way down her back. 'What the hell are you talking about?' she said.

'We've just this moment got out of the mountain complex. It's just me and Iaomnet Wszola – we think the others left us for dead. We're tired, but unhurt.'

'Oh yeah, you sound just fine.'

'Oh Jesus, oh Jesus, oh Jesus,' Iaomnet was whispering.

'Thank you, thank you, thank you.'

'I'm afraid Iaomnet is understandably upset.'

'Stay put. We'll come up and get you.'

109

'Roz –'

'Captain Sekeris, are you getting all of this?' said Roz quickly.

'Yes, ma'am. We've got the medical team on standby for your return.'

‘We’ll talk soon,’ said Roz. Will we ever? ‘Save your strength for now.’

The medical team took one look at Iaomnet and tranquillized her. It was mostly exhaustion, the nurses said, as much from fear as from the marathon walk to escape the mountain. They put her to bed in sickbay, over her feeble protests.

The Doctor took one look at the medical team and they left him the hell alone. He looked distinctly unsteady to Roz, sitting on a bed in sickbay with his head tipped back against the wall. He looked thinner, not as though he’d lost weight, more as though he’d somehow lost *substance*.

She went into the sickbay, and he snapped back in an instant.

‘Roz,’ he said. ‘We have to get to Cassandra.’

‘Is that where Chris is heading?’ asked Roz.

‘Yes,’ said the Doctor. ‘Possibly, it doesn’t matter – we have to go there.’

‘No problem. Sekeris is waiting for my instructions. But we’ll be flying through a war zone without authorization. I’ll have to come up with a good story.’ He didn’t answer, his head tilted and his eyes half closed, as though he was listening to something far away. ‘A *very* good story, Doctor.’

‘Tell him civilization as we know it is in danger.’

‘Is that true?’

‘Yes,’ he said. ‘Tell him whatever you like.’

‘Doctor,’ she said, ‘what was that about my being married to George Reed? Because if it was a joke it wasn’t bloody funny.’

‘Sorry,’ he said. ‘I’m still remembering a lot of timelines. It’s hard to sort them out. I wasn’t expecting you. I thought I’d left you behind in 1941. Or that you were killed by yourself in Woodwicke. Or that you were the head of the Order of Adjudicators.’

‘How many timelines do you remember?’

He thought about it. ‘About fifty,’ he said. ‘That’s not so bad. I started

with two thousand and three.'

'Hold it right there.'

They both looked up. Iaomnet stood in the doorway, wielding a hypospray filled with something unpleasant and purple.

'I don't know what you two are up to,' she said, slowly and carefully around the sedative, 'but it's going to stop right now.

I'm taking you both into custody. So don't mess with me.'

'I wouldn't do that if I was you,' said Roz. 'I told the crew that you were under suspicion of being a subversive oggielover, possibly even a terrorist. Now, you could run to them and tell them who you really are. But who knows how they'd react?'

'Cassandra,' said the Doctor in a voice that startled both of them. 'Now!'

The *Wilfred Owen* tore through the Agamemnon system as fast as its little engines would carry it. Sekeris stayed on the shuttle's bridge through three consecutive watches, almost scowling with seriousness. Civilization as he knew it was at stake.

Roz caught a few hours' sleep and ate most of a rations pack.

The Doctor stayed in one of the scanner rooms, displacing a series of rostered techies, who hovered nervously outside the door. Roz gave the latest one a salute as she squeezed into the room behind the Doctor's seat. He was watching six screens, apparently simultaneously.

'How's our Imperial Intelligence Agent?' he said.

'Sulking in her room.' In the end Roz had taken the hypospray away, and had Iaomnet confined to quarters. 'I think she's a spent force.' The double-eye had that 'I've Seen Too Much, Gibber Gibber' look that people around the Doctor sometimes got. Roz suspected she'd had that look herself, once or twice. 'How are your timelines?'

'Down to seven that I can clearly remember. You're alive and with me in four of them. The rest are all blurry, like afterimages.

Look,' said the Doctor.

'Where?'

He tapped one of the screens. Roz looked where he was pointing, a computer-enhanced sphere labelled Orestes. One of 111

Iphigenia's sibling moons. Two smudges of light were labelled ISN *Victoria* and ISN *Doran*. Green figures and red dotted lines surrounded the two ships.

Roz didn't have to know how to interpret the military data to realize what she was seeing. 'They've broken from orbit.'

He nodded. 'They're following us.' He put his hand on a control, and the image swivelled in three dimensions. 'But they can't catch us.'

There was another ship, tiny, labelled only by a serial number.

Its projected course took it all the way to the outermost planet.

'The Hopper,' said Roz. 'So Chris and the others made it away.'

'Why there? One of the others must have put two and two together and got the same answer as I did…'

'Four?' said Roz.

'The *Victoria* and the accompanying frigate, the *Michael John Doran*, will overtake the Hopper in about ten hours. They'll take its crew and passengers prisoner. That'll slow them down a bit, but when we get to Cassandra, they'll only be a few hours behind us. We won't be able to waste a moment.'

Roz didn't ask what they'd be doing. She'd get an explanation as and when the Doctor decided it was appropriate. 'Wake me up when we get there,' she said.

She woke up instantly as someone knocked on her cabin door.

'Ma'am?' called a voice.

'Yeah!'

'We're in orbit around Cassandra. The Doctor is asking to see you, ma'am.'

Roz opened the door and squinted at the soldier. 'Two seconds,' she said.

In the sensor room, the Doctor had ripped wires and cabling from the

console. The surviving screen was running a continuous sweep of the comet's surface. According to the terminal in Roz's quarters, it was a rogue chunk of rock and ice in an erratic, elliptical orbit, bumbling in and out of the Agamemnon system.

'There's a landing pad,' said the Doctor. 'Tell your captain to head for these coordinates.'

'I don't see it,' said Roz, peering into the screen.

'Right next to the crater.'

'That's not a crater,' she said. 'That looks like… I don't know what that looks like. The surface is torn up. Another fake?'

'Something more than that,' said the Doctor. 'Trust me, it'll be safe to land there. The sooner the better.'

'Right. I'll go tell Sekeris and then I'll suit up. Meet you in the airlock?'

'Bring Iaomnet.'

Roz let out a long, slow whistle.

'She can watch our backs. Besides, I want her where I can see her.'

'Doctor, that doesn't make any sense.'

His eyes never left the screen. 'Scenario: we leave Iaomnet in the shuttle. She manages to persuade Captain Sekeris of who she really is. He decides it would be a good career move if no one ever found out he'd ferried us. The shuttle quietly lifts off, leaving us stranded.'

'We'll see you in the airlock,' said Roz. 'Fifteen minutes.'

After travelling with the Doctor for a while, Roz had decided there was a switch inside the human brain marked 'That's Too Damned Big'. She had felt that switch flip a few times now, in the presence of objects and creatures and minds that were just a bit much to cope with without a cup of tea, a lie down and a long session of philosophical introspection.

The switch in her head was jammed in the on position now.

She was grateful. It allowed her to think about the size of the things around her without having to comprehend it. Medical advice: never stick anything in your ear smaller than your elbow; never stick anything larger in your skull than, say, a continent.

Roz had expected to have to force Iaomnet out of the shuttle at gunpoint, but the double-eye had jumped at the chance to accompany them. 'I thought I was just going to babysit a couple of professors,' she told Roz, as they pulled on their suits. 'I want to know what's going on.'

'I doubt it,' said Roz. 'Just remember, once we're out there, your life depends on us, and ours on you. All right? Try to get the drop on us in a nitrogen-oxygen atmosphere.'

Iaomnet nodded, seriously. 'If it's anything like Iphigenia…'

She looked up as the Doctor came into the airlock. 'Well, you guys are the experts.'

There was a brief tussle as Roz and Iaomnet checked each other's gear, and the Doctor struggled into the old-fashioned spacesuit he'd worn on Iphigenia.

They'd followed him on to the surface, Sekeris's voice nervously drifting after them as they headed over the snow and grit.

Now they were standing at the edge of the crater, looking down into it. She had been right – no meteor or asteroid had struck the dirty snowball to make this mark. This wasn't random.

Something had smashed its way inside.

Iaomnet said, 'Have you ever seen a bear smash its way into a beehive? In a sim, I mean?'

The rock had been gouged out, and then the metallic surface underneath had been gouged out. Imagine an office block the size of a small city, with all the roofs torn off. The edges of the metal shimmered, reminding Roz of fractal displays.

Here and there Roz could see vast tunnels, vanishing into the heart of the comet. Comet. This wasn't a comet.

But she'd deal with that when the switch turned itself off again.

'How *old* is this?' Iaomnet breathed.

'Ten million years,' said the Doctor. He scrambled over the lip of the rock and started heading towards the nearest tunnel.

Iaomnet said, 'We can't go in there. It's like Iphigenia, it's –'

'Don't say it,' said Roz sharply.

'Come along,' said the Doctor.

They walked for an hour. Roz kept watching the sky, wondering when the Carrier would become visible, trying to keep her eyes off the structure.

Iaomnet seemed oddly comfortable with it. 'It was meant to store something,' she said. 'Or carry something. Something big was meant to move around in these tunnels.'

They had almost reached the edge of the great tunnel. Roz tried to estimate its size, but the scale was confusing, improbable.

Perhaps a kilometre across. She thought of missiles, or alien 114

carrier ships, exploding out of their camouflaged home to devastate astonished empires.

They were standing deep inside the 'crater', surrounded by empty rooms. Roz wondered if they were looking at them from on top, beneath or sideways. It depended on how whoever built this thing generated their gravity, she supposed. She had a bizarre vision of office furniture floating out through the missing walls.

The rooms had white walls or floors, startlingly naked, as though rejecting the snow and filth. Or polished to that perfect white smoothness by millions of years of cosmic dust? Why was there anything left at all?

The Doctor walked up to a human-sized rectangular shape near the edge of the tunnel. To her total lack of surprise, he took out a screwdriver from a suit pocket and started to muck about with some bit of machinery or electronics or whatever it was that had once made this colossal thing tick.

'What are you looking for?' Iaomnet was almost giggling. 'The self-

destruct button?'

'The power relay,' said the Doctor. 'Which I've found. It shut down to conserve energy after ten thousand years of disuse. I'm trying to convince it we're here.'

'It? It what?'

'Ah! There!'

With a rumble they could feel through their boots, the door slid open. Roz realized she was looking at an alien lift.

'You're joking,' she said.

'Trust me,' he said. 'According to the relay, the power systems are quite intact. Much of the structure will have been in protective stasis. In we go.'

Iaomnet pulled back. 'What if it shuts off partway down, or something?'

The Doctor didn't look at her, climbing into the lift. It was big enough to hold a small crowd. Or a single, huge creature? 'There isn't time to think about it,' he said. 'You should stay here if you're not sure you want to come.'

Iaomnet got into the lift with him. Her frightened breathing was loud in Roz's ears. She followed them in.

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Roz was expecting the Doctor to do some more creative engineering. Instead, he pressed a few buttons. The doors hesitated and then closed, and the lift moved slowly down, down into the body of the comet.

Roz counted the minutes. Three. Four. It was obvious the Doctor knew what he was dealing with. She wished she'd argued him into leaving Iaomnet on the shuttle – he was probably holding his tongue in front of the double-eye.

The lift began to slow. Roz suddenly realized there was gravity

– generated by the floor, she assumed, since the feeling of slowing down was so gentle.

‘The lift runs parallel to the tunnel,’ said Roz.

‘Where are we going, then?’ Iaomnet wanted to know. ‘What’s at the base of the tunnel?’

The lift doors slid open again, revealing a great black space.

The Doctor cautiously stepped out of the lift, found the outside wall, and evidently the light switch.

The entire tunnel was suddenly alive with spotlights, patches of blue-hot radiance moving around like insects. Picking out the six walls, made out of the smooth white stuff. Picking out recesses and structures in the walls. Sweeping over the immense skeleton crumpled at the bottom.

The Doctor did more things to the controls he’d found. The lights slowed down, expanded, filling the tunnel with an almost even illumination. ‘What the cruk is *that*?’ said Iaomnet.

The creature’s bat wings were spread out, collapsed beneath the weight of its body. The fine bones of the wingtips were as thick as a human arm.

‘Don’t worry,’ said the Doctor. ‘They’re extinct.’

‘Are you sure?’

‘This one is, anyway,’ said Roz.

‘Good,’ said the Doctor. ‘Because to get where we’re going, we’ll have to walk past it.’

Roz and Iaomnet followed him out on to the floor of the tunnel.

There were huge doors around its base. Looking up, she could see a hexagon filled with stars.

‘Is it just me,’ said Iaomnet, ‘or does it feel like a horror sim in here?’

‘Yeah,’ said Roz, surprised. ‘You’re right. Psychic residue?’

‘What?’

‘Quite probably,’ said the Doctor. ‘Like a trace of radiation.’

‘Radiation?’ said Iaomnet. ‘After ten million years?’

‘Psi powers don’t obey the physical laws of the universe,’ said the Doctor grimly. ‘Imagine the power of this thing when it was freshly dead.’

‘It must have been pretty powerful when it was alive,’ said Iaomnet. ‘Look at the walls.’

Roz looked up, where the intelligence agent was pointing.

There were great claw marks in the metal. She looked at the hooked claws at the end of the thing’s hands, imagining it scrabbling at the metal, trying to climb out. They’d trapped it down here.

‘That’s how the surface was damaged,’ said Roz. ‘In a battle with these things.’

‘Yes,’ said the Doctor. ‘The Real World Interface of these early models was rather unstable.’

‘The what?’ said Roz.

‘Where are we going?’ Iaomnet insisted. ‘I mean, this is incredible, but I’d like to know where you’re taking us.’

‘The console room,’ said the Doctor. ‘We’ll need to find some transport first. It’s going to be a long trip.’

Roz stopped near one of the claws. She just stood there, feeling the switch inside her head snap back off and the size of the thing come crashing down on her conscious mind. The size of the comet. Ship. TARDIS.

‘Holy shit!’ she said.

The console room was surprisingly small. Roz wondered how large the crew had been. Thousands, scattered through the ship?

Six people, one for each panel of the hexagonal console? A single pilot?

They’d got here partly by more lifts and partly in a sort of chunky buggy, meant to carry cargo and not passengers, judging by the suspension. Roz hoped it was still working for the journey back – they must have travelled fifty kilometres through the angular white corridors.

The Doctor had sealed the area and reinstated the atmosphere.

When he was sure it was safe, he pulled off his bulky spacesuit and walked around the console in his ordinary clothes and stockinged feet, muttering.

When his head didn't explode, Roz took off her helmet, unsealing it beneath her chin and letting it hang down her back.

After a while Iaomnet took hers off as well.

'Doctor,' said the intelligence agent, 'how can you work this machinery?'

'My people built this,' he said.

'OK,' said Iaomnet, 'I accept that. But I couldn't operate a spinning jenny. How do you know how to operate these controls?'

'Our technology isn't like yours. What's the word I want?

Stagnant springs to mind.'

'You mean your technology hasn't changed in ten million years? You mean the people who built this are *still around*?'

'They don't venture out very often,' said the Doctor. 'Not these days. And of course the technology has changed. But only in the sense that the old technology has been refined.'

'Miniaturized,' said Roz.

The Doctor looked up at her over the panel he was fiddling with. 'This isn't an oversized version of my TARDIS,' he told her. 'It was meant to be this large. It carried the bow-ships.'

'The what?'

'During the war between the Time Lords and the Great Vampires.'

'Great Vampires, uh-huh,' said Iaomnet.

'The war that the N-forms were built to fight,' said Roz.

'Yes. This TARDIS is wondering where everyone's gone.

After it was damaged and its crew killed, it was captured by Agamemnon's gravity and has been following its erratic orbit ever since. Sending out an equally erratic call for help in a tight beam. The beam is probably supposed to be aimed at a particular base or planet or what-have-you, but Cassandra's wandering orbit means the beam is constantly twisting and turning all over the heavens. When that beam passes within range of a surviving 118

N-form, that N-form automatically switches to full combat mode.'

'Hence the one I squashed on Fury. Without, I might add, having to destroy an entire city to do it.'

The Doctor gave her a look. Iaomnet was watching them both, fascinated. She was just soaking all of this up, believing every word.

'The beam is twisting through time as well as space. At some stage, it must have passed through 1987.' He patted the console, soothingly. 'I think the poor old thing was desperate for some attention.'

'Can you stop the beam?' said Roz.

'Yes,' said the Doctor. 'Iaomnet, could you press that red switch? Just under the yellow dial?'

Iaomnet reached for the switch. 'Are you sure it's OK?'

'I'm sure,' he said.

Iaomnet threw the switch.

'That's the beam taken care of. Along with a few other things,'

said the Doctor. 'Suit up, it's time to leave.'

'You mean that's it?' said Iaomnet.

'No,' said the Doctor. 'That will be it in forty-seven minutes and twelve seconds.'

'Oh shit,' said Roz, pulling on her helmet.

It didn't take as long to reach the surface as it had to find the console room, mostly because the Doctor wasn't flipping coins this time. The lift to the surface was still working, thank Goddess

– Roz had been having visions of having to make their way up the

shaft without climbing equipment.

‘Look,’ said Iaomnet, pointing back towards the *Wilfred Owen*.

It took Roz a moment to pick the figures out of the background –

six of them, walking in combat suits and HE armour across the shattered walls of the crater.

Roz looked up. The *Victoria* was a heavy shape high overhead.

‘Sekeris must have told them everything. Dutiful lad that he is.’

‘It doesn’t matter,’ said the Doctor. ‘Hello!’ he called, switching his radio from *near* to *distant*. ‘Can you hear us?’

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‘I’m Lieutenant Kidjo.’ One of the suited figures waved. ‘Put down any weapons you’re carrying and prepare to be taken into custody.’

‘No problem,’ said the Doctor, ‘but you might like to skip the formalities. If I recall correctly, it takes over fifteen minutes to get through the initial arrest.’

‘It’s a statutory requirement,’ said Kidjo. ‘You know how it is.’

‘Yes,’ said the Doctor. ‘It’s just that the planet’s going to blow up in fourteen minutes.’

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4

The *Victoria*

Signals traffic on the back of his eyelid.

DOGFIST

CLAREMONT *rend* VICTORIA

PETA: 4hr. *Offload/Onload* ref27681

Confirm: *yes/no*

Routine, just routine. The fleet supply lighter *Claremont* giving the regulation *Don't shoot, I'm on your side* to the *Victoria* before burning to match velocity. Cautious, but you didn't blindside an Empress-class supercarrier – not if you wanted to live long after.

Down in the TacPlan they'd still be tracking the *Claremont* as she approached, weapons comp spewing out constantly changing interception options. This fighter on that course, this ordnance on that setting. It was standard doctrine, every blip a bogie until proved otherwise. Kept the officers and the techs sharp for when they needed sharp. Besides, you never knew.

Captain Sokolovsky blinked to clear the message and shut down the biode in his left eye. His executive officer would be handling the run-up to docking, issuing the necessary commands to the *Claremont* to bring it safely alongside. While all the time, the battle comps ticked over in the background dreaming up their kill options and target plans. And TacScan would still be checking, at least four out of the thirty scan 121

stations would be putting the *Claremont* on the Petri dish, looking for anything out of place, just in case.

Because you never knew.

And it was all too late. The *Victoria* was doomed, because its captain had decided it would be so. Because it doesn't matter a damn how good your technology is, or the ratings of your shields or engines. Because a fighting ship *was* its crew and captain. And if it was betrayed…

Goddess, it was an evil thing he was doing.

Sokolovsky was tall and muscular, straight-spined, beppled to look like an albino. He'd kept the white hair and pink eyes for almost a decade; it had been a prank pulled by some of his fellow officers on the night of his wedding, but the next day, in the field, it had terrified a Caxtarid merc so badly he'd got the drop on her.

He remembered the year of the disaster: 2975, when half the Earth

went mad. Watching the news reports in his cabin every off-shift, watching as the random murders increased and increased and the rioting and chaos swelled and the floating buildings began to fall. He had thought he was watching the end of the world.

And he was happy that this world was ending. He kept it from the crew, who watched the news screens in their cabins and wept for their family and friends back home, or who watched in the relaxation lounge, holding someone else's hand or just gripping the arms of the plastic chairs.

Riding the reports of the killings came the reports of corruption. Corruption in the Order of Adjudicators. Corruption in the Imperial Landsknechte. No one was immune as the revelations blossomed outward, to touch the Imperial Bureaucracy, the fourth estate, even the Imperial Space Navy.

Somehow, for some reason, he'd been convinced that the ISN

was immune. When the Navy courts martial had begun, Sokolovsky had known they were doomed.

But it didn't go far enough. The Empire didn't fall. Not all the way, although it fell a long way down. In the year of the disaster, they'd been given a sudden glance into the heart of the corrupt Empire, like biting right into the centre of the infected apple.

There had been a chance to start again, to purify every last part of 122

the Empire's machinery. But the cleaning up had never been finished.

The Empire no longer serves the interests of humanity, Sokolovsky told himself. It was almost a catchphrase in the resistance.

It was cold on the number-two forward launch deck, cold enough to frost his breath. But it was always cold on a launch deck, with nothing but a single bulkhead between you and the big zero.

He blinked, time ticking down in the corner of his eye. Three hours, fifty-eight minutes.

Capture, escape, capture, escape.

Chris opened his eyes. He sat up. Where the hell was he?

The crew of the *Victoria* hadn't been taking any chances.

While the medics took the Doctor away to the sickbay, an armed escort had marched the rest of the Hopper's crew to the brig. It was a comfortable, large room, with some isolated entertainment computers and a food machine.

This wasn't it. They'd put him somewhere else while he was sleeping. Had they drugged him? He didn't feel drugged.

He looked around. The room was small, with a high ceiling, out of reach. He couldn't work out where the light was coming from – out of the walls?

He pressed a hand to the wall. The stuff was – plastic? metal? –

not exactly hot, not exactly cold. He ran his hand along it.

Seamless, one wall curving into another, forming a narrow six-sided shape.

No seams at all. He couldn't find the door. Nothing in the ceiling, either, not even a securicam. How'd they put him in here? Was it some kind of container? Where the hell was he?

'Hey!' he shouted, hammering on the wall. His voice and the sound of his fist echoed back at him, muffled. 'Hey! What is this?' No answer. They couldn't even hear him. 'Let me out of here!'

Chris opened his eyes. He sat up, knocking his head on the wall of the brig.

123

The Ogrons looked up at him from across the room. He blinked, rubbing the back of his head. Martinique was curled on the opposite bunk, looking ill.

'OK?' grunted Sister's Son.

He nodded at the Ogron. 'Anything happening?'

'Eating competition,' said Son of My Father indistinctly. Chris realized the Ogrons were sitting cross-legged in front of the food machine, each one with a pile of banana skins stacked up next to him.

Chris laughed out loud. The nightmare feeling already draining away. 'Have they said anything about the Doctor?'

‘No. Nobody has been here,’ said Son of My Father. ‘What would they tell Ogrons, anyway?’

‘Good point.’ Chris frowned. ‘We’d better work out a way to get out of here.’

‘But Chris,’ said Sister’s Son, ‘there are only three of us, and many soldiers on the ship. If we do get out, where will we go?’

‘First rule of crisis, according to the Doctor,’ said Chris. ‘Panic about one thing at a time.’

Sokolovsky’s communicator chimed. ‘Yes, Lieutenant?’

‘The prisoner who was taken to sickbay has recovered, sir,’

said Emerson. ‘He wants to talk to you, sir.’

Sokolovsky was striding through the *Victoria*’s corridors. The time was ticking in the corner of his eye, a constant flicker of hot red figures. ‘He’ll have to wait,’ he said.

‘Er, he’s very insistent, sir.’

‘He’s a civilian, Lieutenant.’

‘Yes, sir. He’s a very insistent civilian. An exceptionally insistent civilian, sir.’

Sokolovsky couldn’t help smiling. ‘All right, then, Emerson.

Have him brought to the bridge. I’ll sort him out.’

‘Er, sir? He’s already on the bridge.’

‘What?’

‘He seems to have persuaded security it was in the ship’s best interests. I’m there now, sir, keeping an eye on him.’

‘I’ll be there in thirty seconds.’

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The man was indeed on the bridge. All over it like a rash, flitting from station to station, peeking over the shoulders of the Ops.

Sokolovsky sank into the command chair and watched the little man pace. The captain's station was almost at the back of the bridge, on the left side, giving him a view of every part of the sloping, wedge-shaped room. He could call up any station's displays on his own screen. Theoretically, he could fly the ship himself, with the help of the computer.

It took the Doctor almost a minute to realize he was there. The civilian fixed him with an intense gaze and walked up the gentle slope of the bridge to his station.

'Captain Sokolovsky,' he said. 'It's vital that you allow me to take a shuttle down to the surface of Cassandra.'

'Why?' said Sokolovsky.

The Doctor glanced back at the screen, where Agamemnon's outermost planet was a fat white disk. 'It's a matter of extreme importance,' he said. 'I wish I could tell you more, but I can't.'

He turned back. 'All I can do is try to persuade you to let me land. I'm not exaggerating when I say that the course of history depends on your assent.'

Sokolovsky was surprised at how believable the little man's speech was. He had half a mind to have one of the shuttles readied, if only to see what the Doctor was going to do down there.

'Captain,' said ShipOps, 'the *Claremont* has begun docking.'

Sorry, Doctor, I don't have time to find out what you're all about. 'Thank you, Ensign. Doctor, we'll have to continue this later. Emerson, could you take our guest down to his friends?'

'Yes, sir. This way, Doctor.'

'Sir,' said someone, 'the *Wilfred Owen* has just lifted off.

Lieutenant Kidjo wants to speak with you urgently.'

'Oh my God!' someone else said. 'Sorry, sir, a firefight has just broken out in docking bay four!'

There was a moment of stunned silence on the bridge.

'Report!' snapped Sokolovsky.

‘It’s the crew of the *Claremont*!’ exclaimed ShipOps. The Doctor ran to their station, peering into the monitor. Sokolovsky 125

punched it up – a securicam display of the fight. ‘What are those things?’

‘Aliens!’ someone said. ‘I’ve never seen body armour like that, ever.’

‘What kind of aliens?’

‘How did they get our codes?’

‘Security teams iota, epsilon, scramble immediate!’

Captain Sokolovsky said nothing.

What Cappiello would really have liked to do was to leave his post.

There were alarms going off everywhere, troops running up and down corridors, dashing past him. Twice, he heard distant explosions, the sound and vibration cut short as bulkheads crashed down to seal areas exposed to space.

He couldn’t get an answer on his comlink, and no one would stop long enough to talk to him.

So he stayed in front of the brig, his rifle armed and ready, waiting for someone to tell him what was going on.

He was leaning against the intercom grille when it beeped.

Cappiello jumped, spinning and aiming his gun at the speaker before he realized.

‘Hey!’ shouted one of the prisoners. ‘Help!’

Cappiello thumbed the switch next to the grille. ‘What?’

‘For God’s sake, open the door!’ shouted a voice. ‘Get us out of here!’

There was an appalling roaring sound. ‘Jeez,’ said Cappiello.

‘Is that the Ogrons?’

‘No!’ shouted the human voice. ‘There’s a dinosaur in here with us!’

‘A what?’

‘A crukking dinosaur!’ A blood-curdling scream cut across the roaring. ‘It’s killing them! *Let us out!* ’

Cappiello raised his weapon and opened the door.

Before he knew what was going on, he was lying on the floor with two Ogrons sitting on him.

‘Hey,’ said Cappiello.

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The yellow-haired human prisoner was holding his gun, flipping it over in his hands. ‘Flechette gun,’ said the young man,

‘ideal for shipboard combat.’ Another dreadful roar came from inside the cell. ‘Put him in with the dinosaur.’

The Ogrons pulled Cappiello to his feet. ‘What?’ he said. ‘You can’t!’

‘Professor Martinique is still in the cell,’ pointed out one of the apelike aliens.

The blond stuck his head around the door. ‘Come on, Professor!’ he said.

The Ogrons pushed Cappiello towards the cell. He couldn’t even struggle – it was like being held by a couple of buildings.

The cell rang with roars, but the dinosaur was conspicuous by its absence. Cappiello looked around, bewildered, hoping what he’d been taught about the Ogron diet hadn’t been true.

The human was talking to the remaining prisoner, an older man. ‘We can’t leave you here,’ he insisted.

‘Don’t be insane!’ said Martinique. ‘I can’t fight. I’m staying right where I am!’

‘Professor –’

‘I’ve had enough!’ squeaked the man. ‘Don’t you see, I can see it, I can see everything that’s going to happen! Everything, everywhere, ever!’

The blond looked at Cappiello. ‘Sorry,’ he said. ‘The professor’s not been very well.’

The Ogrons put Cappiello on to the opposite bunk. He looked at the piles of banana skins, and the video-game terminal, the circuitry teased out of its volume control and cranked up four times as loud as it was supposed to go. Error messages were flashing on the screen, over the graphic of a big green dinosaur chasing a little human figure around.

The door slammed shut. Martinique looked at Cappiello.

Cappiello looked at the door.

'Shit,' he said.

Sokolovsky sat in the captain's seat, listening to his bridge crew speaking. The initial shock was firmly under control, their voices taut but calm as they relayed orders and reports.

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Some of them were glancing at him, wondering why he wasn't giving more orders, doing everything he could to stop the intruders. Wondering why he seemed so very calm.

On his screen, there was an icon, just a black dot. The icon was attached to a file covertly attached to a normal console maintenance program. The file was full of pointers attached to a dozen programs in the security and life-support systems. Those programs were linked to emergency hatches and vacuum bulkheads throughout the *Victoria*.

Touch the icon, enter the security code, and the entire ship would depressurize within thirty seconds.

Sokolovsky hadn't discussed this option with the intruders.

He'd thought of it himself, late, late one night as he watched the news from home. Before the disaster, he'd never paid much attention to the news. Now he found it necessary to view it every night. Perhaps in case another disaster befell the Empire. Perhaps hoping that it would.

Late, late one night, considering strategic options while the light from the news screen flickered over his face… Asking himself how committed he was to this mission. Sending the intruders a coded message, asking if they'd be wearing HE suits.

The intruders were gaining ground, but slowly, much too slowly. His crew were putting up one hell of a resistance. God, he was proud of

them.

Sokolovsky paused for an instant, thinking about how quick it would be, so quiet, for most of them a moment's panic and then oblivion. His finger hovering over the key, wondering how killing his entire crew served the best interests of humanity.

The male prisoner and the two Ogrons exploded on to the bridge, waving weapons. 'Nobody move!'

Everyone stared at them in shock. The navigator at Ops ripped out his flechette thrower.

The deck was suddenly filled with light. For a moment, Sokolovsky thought the prisoners had done something, set off a bomb or a flaresnare.

A moment later, something hit the ship, something so big it was irresistible. Sokolovsky tumbled from his seat as the *Victoria* 128

lurched. There were shouts and cries, he was sure, but he couldn't hear them over the noise of the light.

'The whole shagging fragging crukking planet blew up!'

'Is that a report, Ensign?'

'At this time, sir,' said SensOps, 'I have no further data.'

'All right,' said Sokolovsky. 'Let's get off the floor.'

'Yes, sir.'

Sokolovsky pulled himself to his feet and almost fell over.

'We're adrift,' he said. 'The stabilizers are out.'

'Yes, sir,' said Vincenzi. 'Was this part of the plan?'

Sokolovsky gripped a railing, looking around at his bridge, trying to smooth his white hair with his free hand. Vincenzi sat in his chair, hands on the controls, dark eyes unblinking with concentration. 'The *Doran* is also adrift. They're not answering my hails, so there's some good news. The *Wilfred Owen* report that they're still going to attempt to dock. They haven't got much choice, they're falling apart.'

'What shape are we in?' asked Sokolovsky. Around him, the bridge

crew were picking themselves up, trying to get a reaction from their dead stations. He realized that Vincenzi had simply cut off their access, and was running everything from the captain's station.

His crew were staring at him as Vincenzi's troops led them from the bridge. Sokolovsky shook his head, suddenly glad that someone else was in his chair.

'Sir?' called a trooper. Vincenzi looked up. 'What about these ones?'

The soldier had hold of the Doctor's arm. The little man looked relatively undamaged. His yellow-haired friend looked slightly worse off, the Ogrons helping him to his feet while Vincenzi's soldiers kept them covered.

'What destroyed Cassandra, Doctor?'

'I wish I knew.'

'You must know,' said Sokolovsky. 'One moment you're insisting I let you take a shuttle down there, the next the planet's an expanding cloud of vapour and rubble. It's just possible, you know, that there's a connection.'

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'I honestly don't know what happened, Captain.' The Doctor glanced at the screen, where the frigate hung at an awkward angle against a backdrop of glittering fragments. 'I wish I did.'

Vincenzi got up from the captain's chair. After a moment, Sokolovsky realized the man was waiting for him to sit down.

'What was it you were planning to do down there, anyway?'

said Sokolovsky, taking his position.

'Blow up the planet, of course,' said the Doctor. 'And someone's gone and done it first.'

One of Vincenzi's troopers handed Sokolovsky a clipboard as the captain strode towards the meeting room. The Doctor trailed along behind them, scowling and still looking puzzled. The ship still had a noticeable tilt; Sokolovsky steadied himself with a hand against the wall as he walked on, reading. The sooner they got the internal gravity sorted out, the better.

‘It’s a status report, sir,’ said the trooper, unnecessarily. ‘The most important problem is that the warp drive is down. It’s not the drive itself, but all the control connections that have been damaged. We could start it up, but we’d have no way to tell the thing what to do.’

Sokolovsky could see all of that from the report. But the trooper was just trying to be helpful.

Besides, thought the captain, if he wanted trained staff he could always let someone out of the brig.

The ship lurched as the repair team tried once again to get the stabilizers to work properly. Now the floor was sloping in the other direction. Sokolovsky sighed and went into the meeting room.

There was a podium at the front, neatly arranged rows of chairs, enough to accommodate the entire off-duty crew if necessary. The chairs had been dragged into a circle, as though this was a big friendly community meeting, instead of a what’sgoing-on, what-the-hell-do-we-do-now meeting.

Everyone from the Hopper and the *Wilfred Owen* was there, guarded by a couple of Vincenzi’s troopers. Cwej and the two Ogrons; an academic and his student, both looking bewildered; an aristocratic-looking woman; and –

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Sokolovsky turned to look at the Doctor, who had somehow appropriated his clipboard. ‘Very nasty, this. If you switched on the warp drive now, the uncontrolled gravitic curve would probably catapult you straight into the nearest massive object.’

He looked up. ‘Oh,’ he said.

A second Doctor was sitting in one of the chairs, gravely eyeing his counterpart. Now everyone was looking back and forth between them. Same man, identical clothes, identical grim expression.

‘It’s the result of tampering with… what’s on Iphigenia,’ said the Doctor from the *Wilfred Owen*. ‘Nonsense like this is probably happening over half the galaxy.’

The Doctor standing next to Sokolovsky nodded. ‘One of us is a copy.’

‘Which one?’ said the aristo.

‘Me,’ said the Doctor standing next to Sokolovsky.

The Captain realized he’d just taken a step back from the little man. ‘What the hell is this?’ he said.

‘Now you begin to see why I said history hung in the balance,’

said the copy Doctor. ‘Reality itself is being affected by these events.’ He looked at his counterpart. ‘At least now I know who destroyed Cassandra.’

‘Just what I would have done,’ deadpanned the original Doctor.

Sokolovsky decided to deal with the whole thing later. ‘What condition is the *Wilfred Owen* in?’

Kidjo stared straight ahead, jaw set. The shorter woman from the shuttle sighed and said, ‘It’s scrap metal. I can’t believe we managed to limp back here.’

Sokolovsky leant on the back of a chair, looking down at the Doctor from the *Wilfred Owen*. ‘When you decided to blow up an entire planet –’

‘Just a comet,’ said the Doctor.

‘– and I don’t want to hear about *how* you did it just yet –’

‘It was only a little comet.’

‘– did it occur to you what might happen to any nearby ships?’

‘What happens to this ship,’ said the Doctor, ‘or to any of the others, is nothing compared to what would have happened if I hadn’t destroyed Cassandra. Captain, I’ve just saved you the 131

nasty decision of what to do with an ultimate weapon. Keep it, and let every power in the galaxy come in search of what you’ve got? Or destroy it?’

Sokolovsky stared at the Doctor. Vincenzi said, ‘Sir, this is turning sour very fast. We counted on a quick getaway, not a month’s worth of repair work. Half the ships in the Task Force will be on their way here by now, and we don’t even have a warp drive.’

‘I can help there,’ said both Doctors. Sokolovsky glared at them. The original Doctor stood up and said, ‘I’ll make you an offer, Captain. I’ll

repair your warp-drive system for you – if you'll release your prisoners. All of us. Let the original crew use the lifeboats.'

Vincenzi said, 'They could be useful as hostages.'

Sokolovsky shook his head. 'The Task Force won't show us the slightest mercy. Get right on to it. Both of you,' he told the Doctors. 'We'll worry about this particular piece of bizarreness later. Vincenzi, get my crew off this ship.'

The prisoners found themselves shuffled around a lot in the next couple of hours. There weren't enough people to interrogate them properly. Chris ended up by himself in a cabin with the door locked, but no guard.

It was a nice cabin, probably a lieutenant's, with a soft bed and a fresher. He spent a while trying to get the terminal to work. It probably hadn't even been disabled – a lot of the ship's computers had been knocked out when the comet blew up.

The fresher was still working. He had a shower and put on half a navy uniform, just the white pants and T-shirt – he didn't want them thinking he was trying to impersonate an officer or anything.

He lay on the bed, trying to get some sleep. You never knew when you'd need it.

The ultimate weapon, the Doctor had said. Wonder what it was? No wonder he'd been in a hurry to get there. Both of him.

He hoped the Ogrons were OK.

The cabin door opened. He rolled on to his elbow. 'Oh, hi!'

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Roz came in. One of the new soldiers locked the door behind her. 'The Doctor sent me down to see you.'

'Justice,' said Chris.

'Fairness,' said Roz.

They traded a high-five. Chris beamed. 'Good to see you again,' he said. 'How's Fury? Cleaned the place up?'

'You could say that,' said Roz. She turned the lieutenant's chair

around and sat on it, leaning over the back. ‘I trashed an N-form.’

‘Awesome,’ said Chris. ‘So, uh, *which* Doctor sent you to see me?’

‘I was hoping you could tell me what was going on there. I can’t get anything out of either Doctor – they’re up to their identical hats in the warp drive.’

‘Well, if he hasn’t told you, he sure won’t have told me,’ said Chris. ‘He usually briefs you better.’

‘Jealous.’

Chris shrugged. ‘He knows what he’s doing.’

‘He’d better, if he’s going to go round blowing up planets.

What do you know about the guys who took over the ship?’

‘Not much. I don’t recognize their uniform. They’re obviously not pirates – too disciplined.’

‘Mmm. Someone’s private army, maybe.’

‘That’s one heck of a bold move,’ said Chris. ‘Knocking over an Imperial carrier!’

‘Maybe there’s some cargo we don’t know about. Whatever.

We’ve still got a mission to complete. We don’t have time to get caught up in some petty local war.’ Roz drummed her fingers on the back of the chair. ‘There’s a carrier on the way.’

‘Which ship?’

‘The *Pequot*.’

‘Indigenous Class,’ said Chris. ‘That’s not so bad. They predate the Wars of Acquisition. They don’t have any big weapons – there’ll be a couple of squadrons of fighters aboard.

We’ll have to counter with ours.’

‘Yeah,’ said Roz, ‘but Sokolovsky’s just put his crew off the ship in lifepods. Who’s going to fly them?’

‘Are you guys sure about this?’

Son of My Father didn’t answer, squeezing himself deeper into the fighter’s cabin. It was meant for an average-sized human body, just too small to comfortably accommodate an Ogron’s wide shoulders.

Chris reached in and tugged the straps into place. ‘Secure,’ he said. Son of My Father still didn’t say anything. After a moment, the fighter’s canopy began to lower with a hiss.

Chris jumped down from the ladder, rolled it over to Sister’s Son, sitting in the other fighter. ‘Are you really sure?’ he said, reaching in to fasten the straps.

‘You heard,’ said Sister’s Son. ‘The *Pequot* will catch up with us too soon. Me and him will go and make them busy, make them slow.’

‘They’ve got two squadrons of fighters aboard,’ said Chris.

‘This really isn’t such a good idea.’

‘Chris,’ said Sister’s Son. ‘You regular guy. Listen, me and him, we decide what to do. We decide.’

Chris just looked at the Ogron, mouth tugging down at the corners.

‘Do this,’ said Sister’s Son, ‘do that, good Ogron, bad Ogron –

all gone now. We go flying, Chris. OK?’

Chris nodded. ‘Try a quick strafing run to distract them, and then pull away. And watch your ass out there.’

‘Can’t,’ said Sister’s Son, glancing down at the straps.

‘I meant –’ The Ogron was rumbling with subsonic laughter.

Chris grinned. ‘Just be careful, OK?’

It took Chris two minutes to get back to the bridge, where Vincenzi was in charge of the engagement. Chris looked at the tactical schematic, a circle of computer graphics on the forward viewscreen.

Immediately, he knew something was wrong.

‘Sister’s Son’s fighter,’ Chris said. The icon was crawling across the screen, away from the *Victoria*. ‘He launched already.

He wasn't supposed to launch for another two minutes!'

The Doctor was watching the screen, intently. Everyone else had their heads down in their displays.

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Chris said, 'There's been a mistake or something. We have to call them back.'

'I can't raise either of our fighters,' said CommOps.

'The *Pequot* have launched their fighters, sir. Iphiko class –

eight Wings. Proton cannons, no missiles,' said TacOps.

'Too late,' Vincenzi told Chris, with a shake of his head.

Sister's Son, thought Chris, what the hell have you decided?

'Five seconds to intercept. Second fighter launching on schedule.'

The icon marking Sister's Son's ship flared. The data beside it turned from green to red.

'First Wing destroyed. Second fighter firing missiles.'

'He rammed it,' said Chris. 'He shot right past the Wings and rammed the *Pequot*.'

'Goddess,' said Vincenzi. 'With a full complement of missiles still in their launch tubes.'

'Severe structural damage to the *Pequot*,' said TacOps calmly.

'Her port engine is afire.'

The Doctor, at least the Doctor who had stayed on the bridge, was staring at the screen in disbelief.

The inverted triangles that represented Son of My Father's ASDACs converged with the blips marking the first wave of Wings. Three of the enemy fighters flared and dropped off the display.

'He didn't launch too early,' said Roz. 'He planned to ram the frigate from the start, didn't he?'

Captain Sokolovsky nodded.

‘Still no answer from our remaining fighter,’ said CommOps.

‘If only there was something we could do,’ said Chris.

Son of My Father’s missiles hit the remaining two fighters, destroying both. Chris heard Roz swear softly.

‘They’re not breaking off,’ said TacOps.

‘With that much damage, they may not be able to. The *Pequot* will try to launch a second flight,’ said the captain.

Do this, do that, good Ogron, bad Ogron – all gone now.

‘They’re not going to get the chance,’ said Chris.

‘But they’re *Ogrons*,’ said the Doctor. ‘Ogrons don’t do this.’

But Chris knew in his guts that some Ogrons did.

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‘Good rock,’ said Roz. ‘Bad rock.’

The *Pequot* flared and died.

‘Goddess,’ said Sokolovsky. He turned to the trooper who was standing in as SensOps. ‘Survivors?’

‘No sir,’ said the trooper.

Vincenzi said, ‘We’re OK again. They’ve bought us the time to get the repairs done and get the hell out of here.’

Chris leant on a console. ‘Geez,’ he said.

The Doctor turned to look at them. ‘Am I the *only* one who’s surprised by this?’

‘Engine burn,’ said SensOps. ‘Make that two, no three engine burns in Orestes GSO.’

‘Ident?’ asked Sokolovsky.

‘Working, sir.’

Should have been right away but Sokolovsky remembered the man was just a grunt, cross trained to near competence but a grunt nonetheless.

It had been half an hour since the *Pequot* had broken apart under the impact of the second fighter. Someone back at Agamemnon Command would have made a decision by now.

He crossed to the second SensOps board and ran an ident sequence himself. Hadn't done that in a while. It took him all the way back to Black Body 27 and the remembrance of real fear.

Ident said that one of the bogies was a Magritte-class heavy cruiser, probably the *Giacometti*, the other two were a Dog-class and a Jaguar-class destroyer – *Dingo* and *Cougar*. That made sense, the three most modern ships left in the task force. Sent to sort out whoever'd killed the *Pequot*.

The Magritte-class carried *soldinosc*, really big, high-V

missiles with a thirty-six-megaton warhead. Given a long run they could hit a fair percentage of lightspeed and still make the terminal manoeuvres to hit a moving ship. *Giacometti* would wait until it cleared Clytemnestra's debris ring and loose off a pair of them at the *Victoria*. Weapons like that arriving at relativistic velocities could ruin your whole day.

He turned back to the Doctor.

'Now would be a convenient time to go to warp.'

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The Doctor looked startled. 'Oh,' he said. 'It's fixed, we can go any time you want.'

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Interlude – March to April 2982

Dhaulagiri, Nepal – 2 March 2982

The mountains made Thandiwe think of home. Mama said they used to be covered in snow, all year round. She tried to imagine it, white

Earth snow like fluffy water, covering all the rock.

Thandiwe stood on the bed in her room. They'd be going home tomorrow; Mama was staying up late, talking to the soldiers.

Usually when they went on trips, they stayed at the new place for longer. A week or even two weeks. But these days they went somewhere for just one night and one day, and Mama talked instead of skiing or buying things.

One of the soldiers, Joanna, had put Thandiwe to bed. The Fat Monster Eater was an irregular shape under the covers, keeping the bed warm. It was the only toy Thandiwe had been allowed to bring.

Outside was very dark. Thandiwe could trace the shapes of the mountains by where they poked up into the sky, hiding the stars.

There wasn't anything in her room, not even a terminal, just shelves and shelves of books.

She got back under the blankets with the Fat Monster Eater, which made a deep chuckling noise and cuddled up to her.

After lunch that day, Thandiwe had gone for a walk through the seminary (which was a school for priests), the Eater trailing along behind her like a big balloon. The 138

building was big and cold and quiet, and there weren't many people around.

Most of them were in a big hall she found. They were chanting, sitting cross-legged on the floor, talking very fast. She couldn't make out the words. It sounded like singing, like music. She watched them for a while, peeking over the top of the railing and looking down into the hall.

She tried climbing up on to the railings for a better look, but it made the Eater nervous, rolling around at her feet. It always did that when she did anything dangerous.

She hugged it, whispering. 'Don't worry. Let's go in here.' The Eater wobbled and bounced away across the floor into the new room.

It was a long hall, with a big table and lots of paintings around the walls. There were rooms like this at home. Thandiwe went up to one of the paintings. It showed a soldier from the old days, a woman in

very heavy armour. The frame was incredibly fancy, gold and red and covered in squiggles and leaves. Thandiwe reached out to touch it, instinctively looking around.

Too late, she realized there was a woman in the room, getting a book down from a shelf. Thandiwe hid behind a chair, but the Fat Monster Eater was too big and round to hide. The woman looked at it in astonishment, and then her eyes found Thandiwe. ‘Hello there,’ she said. She had coppery hair and wore the same simple green clothes as everyone else here.

‘Hello.’ Thandiwe was aware of the Eater, snuggling up to her.

It was always nervous around new people.

‘My name’s Joanna. You must be Baroness Forrester’s little girl. You’ve been exploring, have you?’

‘Yes.’ There was writing under the portrait, a short sentence in a language that Thandiwe didn’t recognize. ‘What’s that?’ she asked.

‘It’s a saying of the first Brigadier,’ said Joanna. ‘One of the nineteen calls to action.’

‘I can’t read it.’

‘I’m not surprised, it’s in British, a sub-dialect of Ancient American.’

‘What does it say?’

‘“Shoot the winged man with five quick bullets”.’

‘What does it mean?’

‘Ah,’ said Joanna, ‘I’m afraid that it rather depends on which school of interpretation you follow.’ She held out her hand to Thandiwe. ‘Would you like some tisane?’

‘Yes please,’ said Thandiwe. 'Will there be cakes?’

‘I dare say cakes can be arranged.’

Joanna led Thandiwe to a large room she called the mess hall where there were tables and chairs. They chose a seat by a window so that they could look out over the broken grey shapes of the mountains.

Thandiwe took a cake and bit into it. She swallowed and said,

‘Where are the priests?’

‘We’re all priests,’ said Joanna.

‘I thought you were soldiers.’

‘We are. Unitatus soldiers think it’s a good idea if we don’t just know how to fight – we should think about why we’re fighting, too, and think about whether fighting’s a good idea at all.’

Thandiwe nodded, taking a second cake. ‘Mama said you were like an extra army, in case someone tried to attack Earth.’

‘That’s right. The Empress lets us keep our own fleet of ships, and sometimes we fight alongside her army. Our mission is to protect Earth from alien invasions. Not that many of those happen these days… it’s more likely to be Earth invading someone else’s…’ She trailed off. ‘Good heavens,’ she said, softly.

Thandiwe sat up in her seat. It was snowing. ‘I thought it wasn’t supposed to snow here,’ she said.

Joanna looked back at her. Her eyes were big and round. ‘It hasn’t snowed here for over a century.’

‘That’s not snow,’ said Thandiwe. ‘Snow is yellow.’

Joanna looked back out of the window. ‘This isn’t sulphur snow, or whatever you’ve got on Io. It’s real water snow. It’s a miracle,’ she breathed.

‘No,’ said Mama. They both looked around. She’d come into the mess hall while they’d been staring through the window.

There were more of the soldiers with her. ‘This is no miracle. The 140

reclamation projects I’ve funded have the potential to restore this whole planet to its former state.’

Joanna had looked at her the same way she’d looked at the snow. Mama had said, ‘Imagine that. The whole Earth, returned to its former splendour.’

It was hours later, and the snow was still coming down.

Thandiwe snuggled up to the Eater. She imagined the snow covering up all the rock like a big white blanket.

Spaceport Five Undertown – 11 March 2982

Look for a garden, he'd been told, a garden in the forest.

The Reserve was a huge stretch of open land in the middle of Spaceport Five Undertown. Simon had assumed it was a city park, a patch of countryside restored using low-level terraforming techniques, but the tour guide said it had never been built over.

There weren't even walkways stretching overhead, just blue sky, truncated at the edges by the floating shapes of the city. It was like standing at the bottom of a well.

Simon wondered how many strings had been pulled over the last millennium or so to keep this place from being used for real estate. *Keep off the grass.*

The map he had been given had a red line drawn on it, enclosing a shaded, oddly shaped space, maybe ten square kilometres.

Simon watched from the window of the flitter as it ambled over the Reserve, mentally following his map. Every so often they put down in a designated tourist zone and went for a walk, the tour guide pointing out interesting plants and insects. One more stop, and they'd be as close to the red shaded area as they were going to get.

Getting away from the tour party was easy. The tour guide led his little group through a patch of forest, naming each species of tree. Simon took some photos, gawped at the canopy, straggled, and slipped behind an *Ulmus procera*.

He waited ten minutes for the tourists to move out of sight. The tour guide's pleasant voice diminished slowly, merging with the 141

sounds of the forest. Simon leant against the elm and risked closing his eyes for a moment.

Rooftop parks didn't sound like this. You couldn't hear the wind making a sound like rushing water through the leaves, the tiny sounds of insects, the intermittent, soft bird calls. Or maybe you could hear them in the roof parks, and your brain just couldn't sort them out from the chatter, screaming kids and blaring portable playbacks.

He slung his camera around his neck and moved off down the hill. If he was caught, he was a tourist who'd foolishly followed a robin in the hope of a better picture and had been wandering in increasing panic ever since, too embarrassed to call for help.

He stuck to the forest, avoiding anywhere he'd be easily visible from the sky, following his mental map without thinking. He felt an almost tangible sensation as he entered the red-shaded zone, waking him out of his murmuring thoughts. Somewhere in here, in these ten square klicks, there was a garden.

It took him another two hours to find it. He emerged from the forest into a wide, cleared area. It took him almost a minute to pick out the shape of the house. The lines of roof and wall suggested by the squiggle of vines and moss and shrubs.

Somebody had got there first.

There was a flitter parked in a hollow above the house, trying to look as inconspicuous as possible among the dead trees littering the slope of the hill. It let Simon get within three meters before warning him that it was authorized to use deadly force to resist theft.

It was hard to tell under the mimetic paint job, but Simon thought it looked like a heavily customized Holstek Firefly. *Très* cash heavy and out of his scope; even when he was a spoilt playboy student. He paused for a moment to admire its lines before moving off downhill to kill its owner.

The concrete lump was an eroded, mossy shape, a few metres from the house, hidden by grass and humus. Just enough of it stuck up out of the ground to form an inconvenient and hidden step.

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Simon fell off the edge, twisting his ankle and cursing, and hurtled down a short slope until his embarrassing descent was cut short by the tool shed.

The shed shuddered once, groaned, and disintegrated, showering Simon with bits of rotting wood and small digging tools. Its collapse revealed a surprised-looking woman, who dropped into a martial-arts stance.

Simon spent just half a second lying in the mud with silverfish crawling over him before leaping up and scowling at her.

‘Nice car!’ he yelped, lowering a hand.

‘Thanks. Don’t even try going for the knife in your boot.’ She was around his age, dark, with full lips and electric-blonde hair.

She looked like a sim star. ‘I’ve got a laser pistol in a fast-draw shoulder holster – you’ll never make it.’

‘You wouldn’t get your hand on the butt,’ said Simon, ‘I have a disgel gun built into my right forearm.’

‘But I’m wearing flexible mesh armour under my coat, *and* it’s been treated to be resistant.’

‘Your hands are exposed,’ said Simon, ‘so you *still* wouldn’t be able to get your pistol.’

‘Maybe,’ said the woman, ‘but it wouldn’t do you any good because there’s a troop of heavily armed bodyguards in a military standard AFV less than a klick away – one word from me and they’d be here in less than thirty seconds.’

‘I’ll just have to make sure you don’t say the word then.’

‘They’re monitoring my life signs, so you’d still be dead when they got here.’

‘If they could find me.’

‘These are trained troops.’

‘I wouldn’t put money on it – they’re from up top and I know my way around down here.’

‘Assuming that they just don’t use the AFV’s plasma cannon to sterilize the area.’

‘In that case I’d turn into a bird and fly away before they got here.’

The woman gave him a sharp look. ‘What kind?’

‘What?’

‘What kind of bird?’

‘An eagle.’

‘Golden, bald or imperial?’

‘I don’t know,’ said Simon. ‘Which one flies fastest?’

‘No idea,’ said the woman. ‘It’s a stupid idea anyway.’

‘Well, yes.’

‘The pollution would kill you,’ said the woman. ‘You’d be better off as a mole or something.’

‘Look,’ said Simon, ‘I presume you’re here about the house.’

‘Well, I was, but a man who can transform himself into a bird is far more interesting.’

‘How did you find it?’

‘NOYB.’

‘Who’s that?’

‘None of your business. My arms are starting to ache.’

‘Mine too. Let’s go and ring the doorbell and see if anyone’s at home.’

‘You walk in front where I can see you.’

‘Can’t we trust one another?’

‘All right,’ she said after a moment. ‘But you still have to walk in front.’

Simon took his eyes off her. When she didn’t immediately try to kill him, he relaxed even further. ‘I think we’re around the back of the house,’ he said. ‘If there’s a doorbell, it’ll be around the front.’

He moved off, watching his feet this time, trying to convince himself she wasn’t eyeing his bhunti and smirking. Or possibly trying to convince himself that she was.

Simon and the woman, whose name was Genevieve, spent ten minutes ripping vines out of wood and plaster before the door was clear enough for a person to pass through it. One particularly stubborn clump of foliage pulled loose to reveal the doorbell.

They looked at each other. Simon shrugged and pressed it.

They listened. Nothing. No one had been home for a very long time, probably centuries. Inside they might find a few clues, a few remnants, the sort of stuff that was recovered on archaeological digs. That was if they didn't fall through a rotting floor or get their foot stuck in a disintegrating stair.

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Without thinking, Simon pressed the button again. Faint but clearly audible, there was a tinkling sound from somewhere inside the house.

They looked at each other. Genevieve had her hand on the doorknob when someone opened the door.

'Good afternoon,' said the old man. The very old man. The oldest man Simon had ever seen. He sat in a plastic wheelchair with wide arms, hovering an inch off the floor, a blanket with a checked design covering his lap and legs.

A kitten was asleep on the blanket. The man stroked it with a gnarled hand. He had fine white hair and a billion wrinkles.

Simon realized he was rudely standing there in astonishment.

'Er,' he said. 'Good afternoon.'

'Do come in,' said the man. 'If you've come all this way you'll want a cup of tea. I have some organically grown lapsang souchong which is just ready for use. I grow it myself in the back garden.'

'Where?' Simon asked, stupidly. He realized Genevieve was looking past the old man, into the hallway. Which was warm, and dry, a Persian rug covering polished floorboards, tiny real books lining wooden shelves. He could see the pair of them in a mirror at the other end, looking gormless.

'That would be delightful,' said Genevieve. 'You're very kind.'

'Not at all,' said the old man. 'Doctor Smith. I'm pleased to make your acquaintance.'

'We don't get many visitors from outside,' said the Doctor, leading the way into the lounge. 'Except for the occasional party of Ice Warriors.'

'Ice Warriors?' Simon had never heard of them.

‘Martians,’ said the Doctor. ‘They like to fly down every so often and stage a victory parade. Everyone lines up and waves flags and shouts “hurrah” – that sort of thing. Absolutely pointless, of course, but they seem to enjoy it. And technically, they do own the planet.’

The lounge was full of ancient furniture, all of it in perfect repair. There was a mantelpiece with a bronze Buddha and a bowl of apples. The Doctor hovered over to the fireplace, turning 145

so he would face his visitors as they sat on the sofa. A glass of wine stood on a round wooden table beside him.

‘The Martians own Earth?’ said Simon. Genevieve put a hand on his arm as she sat down. After a moment he sat next to her. A cat rubbed itself against his legs, startling him.

The wrinkles around the Doctor’s eyes multiplied as he smiled.

‘I do wish you’d close your mouth, young man. Sitting there with your mouth open makes you look like a fish.’ Simon obliged. ‘Of course the Martians own Earth, we surrendered in 2010, or rather I surrendered on Earth’s behalf. Thoroughly decent chaps, the Ice Warriors, once you get to know them.’

The Doctor picked up his wineglass, sipped once and put it down. ‘We came to a quite amicable agreement, technology transfers, that sort of thing. There was a joint effort to revivify Mars. They went out to conquer the stars and the human race stayed here and had a good time. Worked out rather well, even if I do say so myself.’

‘What about the Empire?’ said Genevieve.

‘The Martians look after all that sort of thing, fighting off the Daleks and the Rutans and organizing all the paperwork. The Earth hasn’t been invaded in centuries.’

‘But it’s ruled by the Martians,’ insisted Genevieve.

‘Oh, human beings and Earth Reptiles take care of their own affairs. Isn’t that right, Takmar?’

Genevieve and Simon spun, but there was no one standing behind the sofa. The Doctor went on, ‘This little world would be far worse off without their expertise. A little ecology, a little technology.’ He nodded to his invisible scaly friend. ‘Some planets set aside areas as nature reserves, but Earth is a nature reserve. Earthlings quietly

integrated into its ecology, living and working side by side.'

'It sounds very restful,' said Genevieve. She'd obviously decided to humour the old man, hoping he'd drop some useful information into the conversation. 'Utopian.'

'I'm very pleased with it,' said the Doctor.

Simon asked, 'Don't you get bored?'

'The thing about war, young man,' said the Doctor, 'is that the initial excitement of being terrified out of your wits while trying 146

to kill other people who are terrified out of their wits eventually wears off. War is not only hell, it's utterly tedious. There comes a time when it becomes so tedious you look for something else to do with your time. Tea, for example. Come and take a look at the kitchen.'

'Yes, please,' said Genevieve.

Simon followed Genevieve as she followed the Doctor into the kitchen. The wheelchair murmured as it moved over carpet and wood. Simon had the annoying impression that she was dealing with the situation better than he was. Maybe she just gave the impression of dealing with it. She reminded him of women from sims about the Court, people who were like ducks – smooth and effortless on the surface, paddling like mad underneath. He thought of the Firefly. Whoever this woman was, penniless ex-student terrorist she wasn't.

The kitchen was full of gadgets, every centimetre of counter space taken up with streamlined equipment or chuffing, clockwork-and-steam devices. Simon puzzled out the beer brewer and the breadmaker, and an Earth Reptile version of a Tisanesmade, with big buttons for operation by claw.

The Doctor tapped the arm of his wheelchair. A small control panel unfolded outward, and he used it to adjust the height of the chair until he could comfortably reach the Tisanesmade. He opened an old glass jar and shovelled fresh leaves into a hatch in the side of the machine. The kitten, its sleep disturbed, yawned pinkly and hopped down.

'Yes,' he continued, 'the human race eventually got bored with killing, and got on with the sorts of things it's much better at.

Cooking, for example.'

‘Cooking?’ prompted Genevieve. The Tisanesmade was making odd noises, as though bits had been added to its insides and hadn’t quite meshed.

‘Oh yes. People from all over the galaxy visit Earth for the cuisine. That and the fresh air and interesting native lifestyle.’

‘So we’re a backwater, then?’ said Simon. ‘A dot on the map where people come for their holidays.’

‘Ecotourism,’ said Genevieve.

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‘A far more rewarding occupation than going about blowing up other people’s planets, don’t you agree?’ The Tisanesmade made a chuffing noise as though it was about to explode, then pinged.

The Doctor lifted a panel. Inside were three steaming cups of organic tea, a little jug of synthetic cream and a bowl of sugar lumps. ‘From fresh leaves to brewed tea in under three minutes.

Go right ahead.’

Simon put three lumps of sugar into his tea and took a hesitant sip. It was superb. He gave Genevieve a small smile, and she reached into the machine for her cup.

‘There,’ said the Doctor. ‘Not bad for someone who doesn’t exist, eh?’

He winked at Simon, who almost dropped his cup.

Simon and Genevieve had a few moments together while the Doctor was pottering around in the kitchen. They sat next to each other at a long table set with crystal glasses and real china plates.

‘There must be a drudgebot around somewhere,’ said Simon.

‘Maybe the Earth Reptile set the table,’ said Genevieve. Simon gave her a peculiar look. ‘Don’t you think a bot would seem out of place here?’ She looked around at the antique furniture, the oil paintings, the worn paper covering on the walls. ‘I’ll bet this room isn’t even bugged.’

‘What about all the machinery in the kitchen?’ said Simon.

‘Did you notice how the kitchen was completely different to the other

rooms?' said Genevieve. 'It looked modern. Plenty of plastic and technology. But these rooms… The world he's describing is a high-tech, low-impact society. Clean and efficient.

I'll wager they recycle everything, and not because they have to.'

'You're talking about it as though it's real,' Simon pointed out.

'To him it obviously is. He's not quite what I expected… but then, he doesn't exist, does he?'

'He's not what I expected, either.'

They looked at each other, considering whether to swap a few hints about their respective missions. The Doctor chose that moment to hover back in.

'You were both looking for me,' he said, 'but what was it you were really after, eh?' He hovered up to the table. 'I've often 148

asked myself that. But I think I'm used to Utopia after a millennium.' He gave one of his crinkly smiles. 'You're probably wondering whether I'm the real thing or just some madman pottering about an ancient house in the middle of nowhere.

Whether I really am the Doctor. Well, I'm not.'

'You're not?' said Simon.

'I'm not the Doctor. I'm *a* Doctor. An alternative, you might say. You're both young, you have many possible futures, if you see what I mean. Did you imagine you'd be where you are now, doing what you're doing now, a year ago? Five years ago?'

'No,' said Simon.

'I suppose not,' said Genevieve. 'Time has a way of changing our plans.'

'Exactly. Exactly right. Let me put it another way. If you wanted to change the world, would you try to save the whole world, rush about everywhere trying to take care of all the problems that desperately needed attention? Or would you choose just one place and put all of your energy into looking after it?'

'It's a good question,' said Genevieve. 'Spread your good deeds as far as you can, or concentrate on creating one…

Utopia?'

'Exactly.' The Doctor took her hand, perfect skin and nails held lightly in his leathery fingers. 'Exactly, young lady. It was time to make a decision. I hadn't had the choice for a long time, you see. I was trapped here. All I wanted to do was get away, but, you see, what I really wanted back was my freedom. The freedom to choose whether to stay or to go. When I had that choice, I chose to stay.'

'Stay here on Earth?' said Genevieve.

'That's right. I think it was the right decision. Of course, I also decided to go gallivanting about to every planet in existence, toppling evil empires and returning lost balloons to small children. Most of the decisions I could have made I did make –

somewhere.'

'So you don't exist in our world?' said Simon.

'Nor you in mine,' said the Doctor. 'No offence, of course, the timestreams are big enough for everyone. Think of me as a set of hypothetical situations.'

'If you insist,' said Simon.

'One of you stays,' said Genevieve, 'one of you goes.'

'Hundreds if not thousands of each,' said the Doctor. 'Some of me are killed in a prison cell by the Earth Reptiles and left to rot

– things weren't so friendly then. Some of me have gone on to destroy whole worlds – always in a good cause, of course – and others don't face anything more traumatic than a bad aphid infestation. Some of me aren't me at all; at least one of me is a ruthless dictator with my picture up everywhere. In a sense we're all just third-generation copies of the original.'

'The original Doctor?' said Simon. He was starting to get the feeling he got when he cram-viewed too many study sims in a row, carried away on a wave of input.

'Time, as you say, has a way of changing our plans,' the Doctor was saying. 'Choosing the future Time wanted would have meant opening

up the past. A real Pandora's Box, crammed to the hinges with dark and fantastic secrets. I was curious, of course. But in time, as the knowledge filtered through, I would be changed. Changed in ways I couldn't predict. I did know one thing.' His ancient eyes were serious. 'Whatever I would have become, I would have called it evil.'

There was a few moments' silence. Simon asked, 'You said you'd been here for a thousand years.'

'Next Thursday,' beamed the Doctor.

'How? You can't be human.'

'After a thousand years of looking after this planet, I'd say I'm as human as I'm going to get. You could say I've gone native.'

A shaft of late-afternoon light shone through the window for a moment, the last before the sun disappeared behind the distant city. Simon had a strange urge to go to the window and see if the city was still there, if they'd been drawn inexplicably into the Doctor's fantasy world like children into fairyland.

For a moment he could have sworn he saw an alien, an honest-to-God BEM with green skin and five arms and five legs, its ceiling-high anemone shape caught in the beam of sunlight. He glanced at Genevieve. She had seen it too – she was staring at the suddenly empty spot in the lounge, staring out of the window.

From the garden came the sound of children laughing.

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It was dark by the time they finished dinner. The Doctor had done all the cooking himself, with the assistance of the kitchen machines. And probably with help from more of his invisible friends: organic vegetables, herbs from the garden, and a home-made wine that tasted like punch. In the head.

Simon still felt a bit foggy, the wine's aftertaste like fuzz in his mouth. The Doctor had hovered upstairs and shown them the guest bedrooms, fresh sheets on the beds, towels neatly folded on the end. Simon's room came equipped with a couple of cats, who were obligingly warming up the antique brass bed, purring.

Simon sat on the edge of the bed, careful not to disturb the fat, sleek animals. The room was oddly shaped, right at the very top of the

house, tucked away under the sloping roof.

There was a triangular mirror hung on the wall. Simon looked at himself in it, wondering what Genevieve saw. He kept his sandy hair cut short. He had the usual tan and the usual slight fold to the eyelids. The fact that he looked so ordinary was a definite plus for a terrorist. Worked for Mr Jamey.

A window faced on to the garden, pitch-black. Simon wondered what was out there. The lights of the overcity, hidden by the Reserve's thick forests? Or Doctor Smith's world, populated by peace-loving humans and their friendly reptile friends? If he walked out of the door and headed away from the house, what would he see?

Nothing – he didn't have a torch. He hadn't meant to stay until dark. He certainly hadn't meant to spend the night.

He reached out a hand and fingered the peeling wallpaper, wondering if Mr Jamey knew about the place. Of course he knew about it. He'd said something about intercepting another investigator's Centcomp research requests.

The nondescript man (how can you describe someone as nondescript? – but it was just the right word for Mr Jamey) had warned him that his resistance cell had been broken. He'd just dropped it into the conversation, right there at the dance club, while Simon was handing over the stolen software from a particularly unimportant Imperial cleaning robot. Telepaths, Mr 151

Jamey had said over the roar of the music, probably. And something about Simon needing to see a Doctor.

Genevieve slammed the door behind him. Simon leapt off the bed as though it had been electrified, narrowly missed banging his head on the low ceiling, and glared at her.

She was naked under a white bath towel, her hair wet and falling in ringlets to her shoulders. There were beads of water on her arms and the slopes of her breasts. He was struck by sudden memory: Sibongile on the night before the day she died, light from the candles she'd placed around her dorm room reflected in her eyes. Simon looked away, towards the window again.

'There's a Venusian in the bathroom,' she said.

'How do you know it's a Venusian?' he said.

‘It said so.’ She got a firm grip on the towel and sat down on the bed. ‘What were you doing?’

Simon eyed the wallpaper. ‘Checking for gingerbread.’ It was her, of course, the one who’d been making the Centcomp requests. Jamey had just tapped into her information and sent him here. Partly to see what was here, partly to find out why she was interested. He wondered who she was working for.

‘What do you suppose this is all about?’ he said.

Genevieve shrugged. ‘Maybe it’s a sort of miniature amusement park, meant to accommodate people who get lost in the woods.’

‘Maybe he is the Doctor.’

‘A Doctor.’ She stroked one of the cats, which stretched luxuriously. ‘I want to know what’s behind all of this alternative-reality business. I can’t believe it’s just an old man’s fantasy.’

‘Because there’s a Venusian in the bathroom?’

‘I’ll wager that if I looked now, it would be gone. Just another hallucination brought on by whatever was in the tea.’

Simon got a sudden glimpse of long brown limbs as Genevieve shed the towel and slipped under the duvet. One of the cats grumbled as her legs pushed it out of the way.

She propped herself up on her elbow and looked at him. He stared back.

‘Well,’ she said, ‘are you coming to bed or not?’

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He woke up in the darkness with his arm going numb under the weight of her head. Carefully he tried to extricate himself without disturbing her.

‘You can move,’ she said. ‘I’m not asleep.’

Simon shook his arm to get the pins and needles out. He felt Genevieve shift position, her arm slide over his chest, her breasts press against his side. Something else, warm, invisible and not Genevieve moved near his feet. ‘The cats are back,’ he said.

‘Tell them to stay at their end of the bed,’ she said. ‘Can you hear something?’

Beyond the soft rumble of the cats Simon could hear singing. A human voice, soft, ancient. ‘I think it’s Doctor Smith,’ he said.

‘Perhaps he’s singing the Venusians to sleep,’ said Genevieve.

He rolled over to face her, putting his hand on her hip, feeling the smoothness of her skin as it pulled over the muscles of her thigh, tentative in a way that he’d never been with all those countless others before Sibongile. They were face to face now but invisible in the darkness, her breath against his cheek.

There would have been a room, he knew that, a room with white surfaces, hygienic and stain-resistant. A routine autopsy performed by machines that ticked and murmured as they peeled back the layers of Sibongile’s body and invaded its secrets.

Killed stone dead by a non-lethal crowd-control weapon.

Something sonic.

He’d thought of that terrible room often enough, the minuscule *cracks* throughout her body, woken drenched in sweat with the dream smell of disinfectant in his nostrils.

And now her face was fading from his memory, the image losing its integrity like the winding down of a simscreen in a power cut.

‘Do you believe in love at first sight?’ he asked the darkness.

‘Don’t spoil this by talking,’ said Genevieve.

In the morning they walked up the hill together, towards Genevieve’s flitter. She glanced at Simon for a moment and said,

‘Asparagus balloon Constantinople.’ The car obligingly powered down its security systems and they got in.

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Simon stared through the windscreen. At the ancient, ruined house, totally overgrown, the wood of its walls being converted to soil even as they watched. At the garden that was nothing more than an open space in the forest, covered in long grass and humus and weeds. Even the collapsed tool shed would soon be the beginnings of a shrub or an

anthill.

‘Where to?’ said Genevieve.

‘A transit terminal, please,’ he said. ‘I’ve got a meeting to get to. What about you?’

‘I have to get back to Callisto,’ she said. ‘The paperwork will have reached my office ceiling by now.’

When they’d woken up, the house was empty. They’d taken a long shower, and the hot water had lasted the whole time, and there was a fresh bar of soap.

When they’d walked out of the house, and then turned around and tried to go back inside, the front door had fallen off its hinges and plunged through the rotting wooden floor of the empty hallway.

‘Did any of that actually happen?’ said Simon.

‘I *hope* so,’ said Genevieve.

‘I mean, did we actually meet Doctor Smith, and see a Venusian in the lounge?’

‘Must have been something in the tea,’ said Genevieve, starting the flitter.

Simon nodded. ‘Must have been.’

***Joseph Conrad* – 18 April 2982**

They decided to disembark in two parties, separated by at least twenty minutes. ‘I’m finding it hard enough to cope with two Doctors,’ Roz said, as they packed the few things they were carrying. ‘Imagine what customs will think.’

The passenger liner docked with the metaship *Joseph Conrad* at 19.04 IST. The liner had been gradually changing its shipboard day to match time on the *Conrad*, so that its passengers would adjust as easily as possible.

Roz felt jet-lagged anyway. A combination of claustrophobia, dehydration from a month’s worth of pressurized environments 154

and the hot neon light of the *Conrad*. She squinted as she walked down the long ramp with one of the Doctors, carryall slung over her

shoulder.

A bagbot whizzed up to them the minute they reached the grey carpet of the spaceport. It was a chunky box like a toaster on wheels, topped with a wide rack. The edges were padded, which was good, because the thing smacked into Roz's legs twice trying to get her attention.

'Take your bag, ma'am?' it said. 'Show you around? It's a big metaship, easy to get lost. Take your bag?'

The Doctor crouched down and tickled the thing's rim, as though it were a stray dog. 'We don't need a porter,' he told it,

'but we do need a guide.'

'Sure thing,' piped the bagbot. 'Just follow me, no problems.'

Roz looked at the Doctor as the thing started nudging its way through the crowd, moving through the long, grey corridor that led to customs. 'It followed me home. Can I keep it?'

He smiled. 'Might as well make use of the facilities, now we're here,' he said. 'We might be here for a while.'

'I thought you said this was going to be simple.'

'It ought to be simple,' said the Doctor. 'That doesn't mean it will be quick, though.'

The bagbot waited patiently while they cleared customs. It kept up a constant babble of tourist information as it led them through the crowds to their hotel. 'The *Joseph Conrad* was originally a colony ship constructed by the Listeners. Are you sure I can't take that bag? No problem. Its route takes it from the Listeners'

original home, Viam, forty-eight light years from Earth, all the way out to the rim of the Empire and back again, in a continual two-year journey. It is ten kilometres in diameter, with a population varying between three and five thousand people. Two thousand are permanent residents, primarily merchants and their families. The metaship is designed to resemble an actual city as much as possible, with a dome and an artificial sky.'

'Who were the Listeners?' asked Roz.

'No one knows,' said the bot. 'They fled their planet before the Empire

reached it, leaving three unfinished colony ships in orbit.

Landing parties found numerous radio and hyperwave telescope 155

arrays. Apparently the Listeners had been listening to the human emission sphere, and they didn't like what they heard. The Listeners' planet was terraformed shortly after its discovery, but the remaining structures and artefacts were preserved for study.

The aliens left little information about themselves, or where they had fled to.'

'And the colony ship got turned into a tourist attraction,' said Roz.

'Humans like to appropriate bits of other people's cultures,'

said the Doctor. 'The Draconians say it's because humans like to be reminded of who they've dispossessed.'

'Just between you and me,' murmured the bot, 'the word is that the Listeners grabbed the *Victoria*.'

'The news reports said it was the Ogrons,' said Roz.

'Come on,' said the bot. 'Do you really think they could pull something like that off? Welcome to the *JC*'s main street, folks.'

Roz and the Doctor paused for a moment, looking around. It was like Fury, only a lot more upmarket; in fact, if you didn't know you were on a ship, you might think you were under any old dome. 'Why would anyone spend the money to come here?'

the Doctor wondered.

'The ship's technically not under the jurisdiction of any solar system,' said Roz. 'It's hard to enforce Imperial law here. People come here for cheap duty-free and for peculiar drugs, or to get their faces and fingertips modified.'

'Does it rain?' the Doctor asked their guide.

'Only on special occasions,' said the bagbot. 'The meta-ship's food is produced hydroponically, with no need for precipitation.'

'So it's sunny all the time?'

The bagbot said, 'The tourists seem to like it. Except the Lacaillans.

Apparently on their homeworld it rains all the time.'

'How bright are you?' the Doctor asked.

'I haven't been formally rated,' said the bagbot. 'I flunked the Turing – no human talks about luggage all the time.'

The Doctor crouched down by the robot again. Roz glared at anyone who gave him a funny look, sending them on their way.

'Can you run an errand for me?'

'Sure,' said the bagbot hesitantly. 'What did you have in mind?'

Chris looked at his watch. 'OK,' he said, 'let's go.'

The Doctor and Iaomnet followed him down the ramp, looking around. They were almost the last ones off the liner – there were only a few other passengers trailing off the ship, and some uniformed staff.

Customs was miles away, down a long grey hallway. They trudged along, past holograms for the Heart of Darkness Discothèque and the Lord Jim Shopping Centre.

Iaomnet looked pissed off, but she'd looked pissed off for a month. It had stopped being a do-something-violent kind of pissed off about a week ago, gradually changing into a who-cares-anyway pissed off. They were all in this together now, the Doctor kept telling her. Maybe she was starting to believe it.

She'd even stopped trying to contact Imperial Intelligence every chance she got.

'Why'd we have to wait?' she said. 'Why didn't we just tell customs they were twins?'

'That was wearing pretty thin aboard the liner,' said Chris. 'It would have been a bit easier if you didn't both insist on wearing the same clothes.'

The Doctor straightened his lapels. 'I need some way of hanging on to my identity,' he protested.

It had been a hell of a trip. They could have got here in a week, but the Doctor had insisted on travelling slowly. He was too spread out,

he said – he didn't know what would happen.

'So,' Chris asked the Doctor, 'is this going to work all right, then?'

'I hope so,' said the Doctor. 'We need to work out exactly how that copy was created. I can't do it without the TARDIS.' He smiled. 'It'll be good to see her again, but I'm glad I left her here.

Goodness knows what proximity to… what's on Iphigenia would have done to the poor old girl. The first thing is to get settled in, make sure no one's got their eye on us, or indeed their double-eye.'

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Chris realized he couldn't remember whether this was the original, or the copy. It didn't seem polite to ask.

'How long are we going to be here?' Iaomnet was saying. 'You know they'll be looking for me.'

'I'd say it's rather unlikely they'll come looking for you here,'

said the Doctor. 'It's taken us a month to get here. If anyone's interested in us, they'd have done something before now.'

The bored-looking customs officer didn't give the second Doctor a second glance. Chris grinned. They were safe, for now.

All they had to do was get back to the TARDIS and let her sort the two Doctors out. And make sure Iaomnet didn't get away.

'I don't think I like the look of the buffet,' said Roz. Chris had already started loading food on to his plate. 'What is that, anyway?'

'Come on, Roz,' he said. 'You must've eaten lots of alien food as a kid.'

'I don't remember,' said Roz. The hotel's restaurant wasn't crowded, which only added to her worry.

'There were heaps of sim ads for alien stuff when I was little,'

said Chris. 'I used to always want whatever looked grossest.' He stuck a fork in something which wriggled.

Roz said, 'Maybe I'll get something from the menu.'

She glanced back at the table. The two Doctors were sitting side by

side, Iaomnet on the opposite side of the table. The identical Time Lords weren't talking, for once. The last month had been a non-stop discussion of everything from probability physics to Roy Lichtenstein, and on one especially garrulous occasion, both at once. But they'd seemed to wind down over the last week or so. Maybe they'd talked about everything they knew.

The five of them had been crammed into the same room aboard the liner for the last week of the trip. She and Chris hadn't had many chances to talk; they had to constantly keep one eye on Iaomnet. She'd almost succeeded in getting a message to a double-eye, twice. After the second time Roz had wanted to keep her sedated, but both Doctors had objected.

'The copy,' said Roz. 'Do you think we can trust him?'

Chris looked up from the desserts. 'He's just the Doctor, isn't he?' he said. 'I mean, he hasn't done anything suspicious for the last month. Besides, I keep forgetting which one is which.' Roz decided not to let on she had the same problem. 'I'm more worried about Iaomnet – what're we going to do with her?'

'I'm not sure yet. We can't keep dragging her around behind us.'

'Good thing we've had so much experience at escaping,' said Chris. 'We know all the tricks.'

'Messy situation.'

'The Lacaillian stuff's pretty safe,' said Chris. 'Kind of bland, though.'

Iaomnet was eating breadsticks, snapping them into little pieces. She hardly noticed when one of the Doctors got up to hit the buffet table. She ground a piece of breadstick into powder with her fingernail.

'I can help you escape,' said the other one.

Iaomnet stopped mangling the breadstick. She carefully didn't look up. 'OK,' she said. 'How?'

'I have almost entirely regained control,' said the Doctor. 'It's becoming difficult to maintain this façade. We must both get away.'

'Regained –'

‘This form… attached itself to me when the Nexus was disrupted.’

It was like finding the missing part of a jigsaw puzzle under the bed. ‘Emil?’ she hissed.

‘We’ll wait until we have only one or two of them to deal with,’ he said. ‘Then I’ll immobilize one of them, and you take care of the other.’

‘Why didn’t you say something on the liner?’

‘I was still reintegrating my own personality,’ said Zatopek.

‘And if we had escaped, where would we have gone?’

She looked at him. He was still absolutely identical to the other Doctor – as though he was wearing this body like a suit of clothes. ‘How –’

‘Perhaps later,’ said Emil, quickly. Iaomnet glanced over to the buffet. The others were on their way back.

The bagbot was waiting for them at the door to the hotel room.

‘Hiya,’ it said. The Doctor patted it, absently. ‘Your package is right where you left it. Almayer’s Storage reopens at eight thirty tomorrow morning.’

The Doctor fed the little machine credits and sent it rolling back towards the lifts. Roz was unlocking the door. ‘We’ve got two rooms, joined by a connecting door which stays open at all times,’ she said. ‘I’ve asked them to take out the Centcomp terminal.’

They went in. Roz locked the door and slung the key around her neck. The room was small, clean and grey. She told Iaomnet,

‘Just chill. We ought to have sorted ourselves out by noon tomorrow. After that you’ll be free to go.’

Iaomnet nodded, but didn’t say anything. Roz didn’t think the double-eye believed her.

Chris announced, ‘There’s one bathroom between the two rooms. If nobody minds, I’m going for a bath.’ The Doctors plonked themselves down on the curved lounge, switching on the 3D and flicking around

until they found the news.

Iaomnet sat on one of the beds, and took out the book she'd filched from the liner's library. Roz stretched out, put her arms behind her head, and let out a long sigh.

The evening dragged on like that until Zatopek grabbed hold of Roz's heart and made it stop.

Roz had got up to get a drink out of the bar fridge. She had read the price list and had decided to drink the most expensive thing on it. She had just uncorked a miniature bottle of Dargolian Jus de Claymore '56 when one of the Doctors said her name.

She turned around. One of them (the copy? the real one?) was looking at her, and the other one was looking at him.

Her heart stopped.

She felt it, felt the muscle fighting against the sudden violent grip that was crushing it. She dropped the bottle. For two seconds, she thought she was having a heart attack. It took two 160

more seconds to realize it was some other kind of attack. It took two more seconds for her to lose consciousness.

The grip was gone as she hit the floor. She heard shouts as she went under, wondering if her heart had started again.

Chris heard the Doctor shouting. He exploded out of the bath and ran into the other room without stopping.

Roz was on the floor, a pool of liquor spreading out from a bottle near her head. The two Doctors were struggling with each other. Iaomnet was standing next to the door. She kicked him in the stomach. The breath woofed out of him as he fell back and collided with the bathroom door.

Chris rolled to his feet as Iaomnet pulled the Doctors apart.

'Which one are you?' she said.

'It's me,' said one of the Doctors. 'Let's get going.'

Iaomnet grabbed the other one. She had Roz's pistol, jamming it into the Doctor's collarbone. 'He's coming as well,' she said. 'I have to have something to show for this whole disaster.'

‘Yes,’ said the other Doctor. ‘But he’s coming with me. You both are.’

‘Excuse me,’ said the original Doctor.

Iaomnet shook her head. ‘Orders. Right from the top. He’s mine.’

‘You ought to listen to her, Emil,’ said the Doctor. ‘You don’t want an angry double-eye pursuing you.’

‘He’s Zatopek?’ said Chris.

‘How long have you known that, Doctor?’ said the copy.

‘You slipped when you started arguing the nuances of Retro-Objectivist philosophy with me. You knew more about it than I did.’

‘For God’s sake shut up, all of you,’ said Iaomnet. ‘Zatopek, you try anything, and my finger might just tighten on this trigger.

And then where will you be?’

‘We’ll argue about it later,’ said the copy Doctor. ‘Come on.

Chris hovered, not willing to tackle them while Iaomnet had that nasty little gun. Instead, he knelt down beside Roz. He couldn’t hear her breathing. He rolled her over and pressed two fingers into her throat. The door slammed.

‘Oh thank Goddess,’ he said. He lifted her, cradled her in his arms. ‘You’re all right, you’ll be all right.’

Zatopek left Iaomnet to guard the Doctor in the transit lounge while he went to buy their tickets.

Iaomnet had bought a long coat and a cowboy hat. She leant against the metaglass of the viewing wall, watching the area. It was 02.00, and the lounge was empty, except for a Ybarraculan curled under one of the plastic seats, homeless or hopelessly delayed.

The Doctor sat on one of the uncomfortable seats, watching the occasional landing and takeoff. Iaomnet kept looking at her watch. Five minutes, ten. It would take Zatopek a while to find a flight at this hour.

Roz had seen a momentary projection of one of his possible selves, but

the alternative that had encountered Zatopek had *stuck*, surviving. He was learning more about what the Nexus could do all the time.

It was just possible that the Nexus could do anything.

Iaomnet seemed to come to a decision. She edged her coat open slightly, so he could see the needler. 'It's time for us to be leaving,' she said.

Ah. 'How do you know I'm the real me?' he said. 'For all you know, I could be anybody. Maybe you've just let the real Doctor escape.'

'I've got what I want,' said Iaomnet. 'If you'd just like to step this way…'

She was far too professional, he noticed, to gesture with the gun or nod her head or do anything that might break her concentration, even for a moment. He sighed.

'I don't suppose you've got a plan you'd care to share with me?' he asked hopefully. 'I wouldn't want this situation to be a complete loss.'

The next day.

Roz and Chris stood at the ticket machine. 'Where should we go first?' said Chris.

'It doesn't matter, so long as it's away from here,' she said.

'We'll worry about our search when we're clear. Somewhere on the way to Earth.'

'Not a liner,' said Chris. He gave her a worried look.

'I'm fine,' she insisted, 'just a bit sore.' The whole left side of her chest felt as though it was bruised, but the hotel's autodoc claimed she was fine. She nodded at the ticket machine.

'Something slow. Definitely nothing Imperial. Iaomnet will have reported in by now.'

She had contacted Almayer's, guessed the Doctor's password on the third try, and arranged to have the TARDIS shipped somewhere safe. Shame they couldn't fly it themselves, but there you are.

Chris's finger hovered over the selections until he found something that met all the criteria. 'There's a Hith transport leaving in half an hour,' he said. 'It doesn't say if they're accepting human passengers.'

'They will once we hit them with a few credits. We'll have to go and talk to them.'

Roz always carried her old Adjudicator ID with her. Chris had thought it was just a memento, but she'd used it to bully a spotty guard into showing them the last day's worth of visual records of the spaceport.

A few pattern searches through the data, and they'd found the Doctor once – and then again. The copy Doctor, looking furious, searching the spaceport before boarding a flight. Iaomnet and her prisoner had obviously got away from him.

'Are you sure we're following the right one?' said Chris, following her as she headed in the direction of the Hith Spacelines desk. 'I mean, is the wrong one the right one to follow?'

'The real Doctor can take care of himself,' said Roz. 'He'll probably just get Iaomnet to take him to her leader, or something.'

Part Two

Cassandra

1

Janus

3 June 2982

Isotank technology had been pretty much the same for centuries.

A large container of water, maintained at a steady thirty-five degrees Celsius. A form-fitting suit which flared out to encompass the nose and mouth with a comfortable, soundproofed breathing apparatus. In a well-designed tank you couldn't even hear your own pulse.

Genevieve's psychoanalyst had recommended regular dips in the tank for their relaxing effect on the brain. The relaxation usually lasted about fifteen minutes before she got bored enough to switch on the biode in her left eye, the text flowing across her field of vision against the soft reddish-black background.

She had been in the tank for thirty minutes, moving through a maze of security protocols, selecting her route with a glance. If her shrink noticed the REM on his monitors, he probably thought she'd just fallen asleep. If security noticed her poking around, she wouldn't receive more than a formal caution. The material she was searching through wasn't actually above her clearance level.

Not much was. It just wasn't meant for general distribution. Need to know, that was their slogan. Seek and ye shall find, that was hers.

There – she selected the securicam playbacks she wanted. A cascade of images, one lens after the other, tracking a quartet of 165

figures through the wide hallways of the Imperial Palace.

Genevieve imagined she was an insect, floating lazily along the roof of the corridor. She selected *audio on*.

THE DOCTOR: Nice art collection.

WSZOLA, IAOMNET: Thanks. I'm particularly fond of the Mogarian sculptures. It's a shame they have to be kept in those gas containers: they're meant to be touched.

He was a short white man in a tweed jacket; she was a tall, dark-eyed agent of Imperial Intelligence, imposing in her uniform. Genevieve could have looked at her service record with a flick of her eye, but for now she concentrated on the securicam playback.

THE DOCTOR: I saw a museum like this in Paris.

WSZOLA: Where's that?

DOCTOR: Europe. Once upon a time. The spoils of conquest, treasures from Egypt and Europe. Very impressive, while it lasted.

WSZOLA: Why? What happened to the museum?

DOCTOR: The English came and took most of it away. The spoils of conquest.

WSZOLA: Aren't you going to ask me where we're going?

DOCTOR: Well, the list of possibilities seems pretty short.

You're taking me to a dingy and purportedly escape-proof cell.

WSZOLA: Or?

DOCTOR: You're taking me somewhere to stick electrodes in my head.

WSZOLA: Or?

DOCTOR: (pause) I suppose you could be taking me to your leader.

Genevieve's point of view gently rolled to a stop. Wszola and her prisoner came to a halt before a huge, rococo door. An error message apologetically explained that Genevieve didn't have the clearance to look inside.

DOCTOR: Oh.

WSZOLA: You're lucky, Doctor. Very few people outside the Council and a few select staff get to go through that door.

DOCTOR: It doesn't look very secure. Where are the guards?

The elaborate security devices?

WSZOLA: We've passed all of them already. That's why there's no lock on this door. If we weren't cleared to be here, we'd already be dead. Knock.

DOCTOR: Sorry?

WSZOLA: Go on. Knock knock.

The Doctor stepped up to the door and rapped on it twice.

‘Anyone home?’ he bellowed.

They stood there for a moment, the intelligence agent and her two armoured guards, watching the little man. He raised his hand, and was just about to knock again when the door cracked open, the two halves sliding apart and up like beetle wings. Green steam puffed out. The Doctor waved it away, muttering about theatrics.

The room inside was vast and dark. Genevieve couldn’t make out any details. She wasn’t sure if that was because it really was that dark in there, or because the securicam recording was quietly censoring itself.

The Doctor took off his hat and walked inside. More green steam puffed up from the floor, obscuring him. The door slid shut with a sigh.

Genevieve switched off the recording, snapped instantly back into darkness and silence. They’d just let him go in there. He’d been invited, he’d passed all the security checks.

Goddess, she *had* to find out what had happened.

She called up the tank’s menu and selected *finish session*. The tank cracked and hissed as the liquid gently drained out, lowering her to the bottom. She felt herself grow heavier and heavier, until finally she was lying on the curve of the isotank’s floor.

Her body servant, a Lacaillian with skin like the sky and the grace of a delicate insect, helped her out of the tank and the constricting suit and mask. She pulled on something practical and black, pulled her golden hair back into a practical ponytail, and sat down at her terminal. She was going to have to pull in a few favours to get access to the prisoner. Quite a few.

The Doctor sat in an ultra-security cell. Actually, ultra-security was supposed to involve enforced unconsciousness in a psi-proof cage, but after the media protests they’d decided to opt for a 167

normal high-security cell with a few additional bells and whistles. The Doctor had already done three interviews by the time Genevieve managed to get in.

One of the massive doors at the end of the cylindrical cell hissed open. The force shield inched its way towards where he sat on the bunk, until there was enough space to comfortably admit her.

He was like something from a horror sim. The cold-blooded and insane killer who looks entirely harmless, even comic. The sims about the year of the disaster were full of characters like him

– quite a small man, wearing very crumpled clothes. She stepped forward, and the force shield moved with her, until she was standing close enough to see his face clearly.

'They tell me you call yourself "the Doctor",' she said.

He lifted his hat. 'Unfortunately, no one seems to have heard of me.'

'Soon everyone will have heard of you,' she said. 'Is that why you did it? So you'd go down in history?'

The Doctor allowed his eyes a few seconds to adjust to the darkness. The room was bare, as though there was a corner of the palace they'd forgotten to plaster with ornamentation and plunder.

The room was huge, as though it had to encompass crowds.

Now there was no one there. Just him.

'Excuse me?' He took off his hat. 'Is the Empress Gloriana at home?'

Directly opposite him, a pale circle of green light appeared.

Ten feet across, a few feet above the floor.

He walked towards it, carefully, half expecting a bit of furniture to unexpectedly smack him in the shin. But his first impression had been right. There was nothing in here.

Nothing but him, and the gnarled scrap of a woman floating in the green sphere.

'I know you,' she said.

'No,' said the Doctor.

'I'm sorry,' said Genevieve, 'I haven't introduced myself. I'm Genevieve ap Gwalchmai.'

'Ah,' said the Doctor, with a small smile.

‘I’m Duke Walid’s personal aide.’

‘I can’t have made your job any easier,’ said the Doctor. ‘I suppose I’ve thrown everything into confusion out there.’ He gestured vaguely at the palace, all around him.

She nodded. ‘The Council have been in session for hours. But they already have long-standing plans they can put into effect.

They’ve been waiting for the Empress to die for a long time.’

‘So what are they talking about?’

‘Well,’ said Genevieve, ‘what to do with you, of course.’

‘I see,’ said the Doctor.

‘You’re a bit of a problem, you see. In cases like this – not that there’s been a case very much like this one, not for a long time –

it’s usual for the guards to rush in with guns blazing. No time is wasted trying to interrogate or sentence a puff of vapour. I’m afraid you threw the guards into confusion by surrendering.’

‘Poor things.’

‘The Council know you’re to be executed; they just can’t make up their minds about how to do it. They’re falling all over themselves to show their loyalty by coming up with worse and worse methods. When I left the meeting, the Pontifex Saecularis was partway through describing a complex technique involving virtual-reality simulation, advanced surgical techniques and drawing and quartering.’

‘They want to be careful, or I may vent my spleen.’

Genevieve managed not to laugh. ‘I wouldn’t worry about it –

everyone’s eyes were glazing over. Personally, my money’s on slow electrocution.’

‘Thanks.’

‘What did you expect?’ Genevieve said. ‘You killed the head of state of half the galaxy. What did you think was going to happen to you?’

‘I suppose I thought she had a plan,’ he said. He scowled.

‘Some people have no gratitude.’

The Empress had no voice of her own. She spoke in a jarring mix of words, snipped from media sources. The sim images travelled across the surface of the sphere, colours in an oil slick, distorting and disappearing.

'I,' she said, in the voice of a little girl. 'Know,' said a deep-voiced man with a Southern accent. 'You,' said an elderly woman.

'Hello,' said the Doctor, raising his hat. His reflection was lost in the colours travelling across the glass. 'Your Effulgence, I presume.'

'I. Am. The. Empress,' she confirmed. 'You. Are. The. Doctor.'

The Doctor rapped on the sphere with a knuckle. It chimed like a champagne glass. 'Now we've got that out of the way,' he said,

'why don't you tell me why you brought me here?'

The sphere flared with light, the images beginning to solidify.

They showed scenes from the planets the Empress reigned over, flashing in rhythm, like a slide show. Hundreds of images. A waterfall on the Skag world. A great oxygen factory on Lacaille 8760. A citadel on Sense-Sphere. Solos. Japetus. The Androzanies. The images pulsed steadily.

'This is who you are, isn't it?' said the Doctor softly. 'Your body's kept alive while your mind is slaved to Centcomp. The computer runs your Empire.'

The images stopped, the sphere's surface a rich luminous black.

'It's true, isn't it? You can see into every corner of the Empire you've built over the last century and a half. You can watch every planet as its population is killed or enslaved, its resources ripped free. You can see every act of genocide.'

'I like to watch.'

The Doctor jerked back at the voice. 'I hope you enjoy it,' he said, very quietly. 'It's all you can do.'

'Yes.'

He breathed on to the surface of the globe, wiping away an imaginary speck. The Empress's skull face rested on the glass inside, looking at him

with hollow eyes. 'It seems like a fair exchange,' he said.

'Explain.'

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'You have absolute power over the human-occupied area of this galaxy. You're an insane, genocidal lunatic whose random word can kill a million people. In exchange for which –' He waved at the globe.

'So what did she say to you?' said Genevieve.

I love you.

'Nothing in particular,' said the Doctor.

I've been dancing with you for centuries. Always dancing so fast, my love, a flashing, flickering movement just out of my reach.

I am the first Empress. I contain the memories of every President of Earth. Downloaded into me, or rather the bloated mass of records I have access to. Oh, I know you destroyed so many traces of your existence. You went to great lengths to cover your tracks through our history.

But I followed your dance. A sighting here, a paragraph in a military report there… I reconstructed some of what you'd destroyed, and guessed the rest, imagining what you had done, what you might have done. What clues you might have left for me to find, your partner in the dance, distant in time but always watching, watching.

Did you know I was there? Did you know a pair of sunken eyes and an electronic mind were staring, wherever you went, whatever you did? You must have known, my love. Must have known that the records were what it was all for. The lives you saved were nothing – they would end anyway. The places you saved would be built over, forgotten. Only the records remained.

Only I was left. Watching, watching.

That's why I wanted you here. That's why I was delighted, overwhelmed with grief and joy when I realized you were here, here at last, in my space, in my time, in my grasp.

You're the outsider, you see. That's what the dance was all about, always – the free agent interacting with the soldiers, with 171

the ministers, with the corporate raiders and the spies, but coming away

untouched, still free, never part of the system.

You've got no alliances. You don't belong to any faction.

There's nothing you want here, no intrigue you're involved in, no blackmail you're entangled in. You can act freely. You're alone in that, my love.

That's why I wanted you here. You have nothing to gain or lose by ripping out the power cords and destroying the backup systems and smashing open my life-support globe and watching me, watching, making sure that I die.

'She did ask me to end her life, though.'

Genevieve was surprised. 'Is that going to be your defence?'

'Everyone wants to know who I was working for. They've asked a lot of questions about Duke Walid.'

'I'm not surprised. He's very high on the list of possible successors.'

'I'd advise him not to take the job, if I were you,' said the Doctor. 'You don't have to be crazy to work here… She suppressed the security systems while we were talking. I expect they came back on automatically after she died, which is when the guards realized what was going on.'

'Did they attempt resuscitation?'

He used a fire extinguisher to shatter the thick plastic of the globe. The Empress had been pounding uselessly on it from the inside, jerking and thrashing in her supporting fluid. The signals travelling into her withered body were turning into chaotic pulses. She hung in tubes and wires, half strangled, her flesh coming apart at the seams. When he broke the glass she was pushed out in a rush of green fluid, her limbs ripping on the plastic.

'No.'

'Goddess knows how many of them would have done it themselves, given the know-how,' said Genevieve. 'Come to think of it, why didn't she just kill herself?'

'A very good question,' said the Doctor. 'Perhaps she couldn't.

Perhaps she couldn't work out how. Perhaps she couldn't bring herself to do it. I don't know. I do know she couldn't bring herself to order

someone else to kill her. It had to be given. Like a gift.' He took off his hat and turned it around in his hands, looking as though there were a lot more to say. 'I haven't told any of the others this, you know.'

'Why are you telling me?'

'Why are you asking me?'

'Perhaps I want to help you,' said Genevieve.

'You'll lose your bet,' said the Doctor.

'Perhaps I'm just curious. I met another Doctor recently, another *the* Doctor. I wondered if there was some relationship.'

'Where was this?'

'Earth.'

'I'm so spread out.' said the Doctor, cryptically. 'Even that far.

I wonder…'

'I suppose it was an omen. The heavens themselves blaze forth the death of princes.'

He wasn't listening. 'I wonder what she expected to happen.

What she meant to happen to me.'

'Ever have the feeling that you're missing something?' asked Genevieve.

'Have you ever woken up,' said the Doctor, 'and looked out of the window at the world, and thought, today anything could happen, today I could be anyone, today everything is possible?'

'You *are* him,' said Genevieve.

'At the moment,' said the Doctor, 'I'm just one of me.' He put his hat back on. 'She's not finished with me yet.'

I love you. Come dance with me. Let's make history.

The Imperial Supreme Court was like a cross between Parliament and an amphitheatre. Concentric circles of high-backed black seats, solemn (but comfortable), arranged around an oval space at the bottom. Seats

for Supreme Judges and Cybertranscribers looked down on the lowest point in the courtroom, a brightly lit square.

173

The Doctor was marched into the courtroom, in heavy chains he suspected had been recreated from records of the Middle Ages. He couldn't quite march with his legs shackled, but he did manage a cheeky, casual amble, looking around the courtroom.

Despite the dimness, he made out Duke Walid, recognizing his face from the homework he'd done aboard the Hopper, sitting in front of news reports with a tub of butterscotch swirl. The Duke had dark hair, a moustache, and one blue and one brown eye.

Very high up the list of successors indeed, as Genevieve had said.

There she was, sitting beside him.

Europe's Duke Armand would be there somewhere as well, and every member of the Imperial Council, eager to be part of this historic (though tragic, of course) occasion. According to Genevieve, they weren't even broadcasting it. Everything was being kept hushed up until they'd got a verdict and a sentence.

After that the media would have open slather.

The Doctor looked up into the fierce white beam. It was supposed to hide their faces from him, he supposed, so that he could see only outlines.

A voice boomed out from somewhere in front of him.

'Doctor. On this day, the fourth of June 2982, you are hereby charged with the malicious, deliberate and wilful murder of Helen the First, Divine Empress Gloriana, Ruler of the High Court, Lord of the Inner and Outer Worlds, High Admiral of the Galactic Fleets, Lord General of the Six Armies and Defender of the Earth. What plea do you wish to enter?'

The Doctor glanced up at the Absolute Imperial Bailiff.

'Sorry,' he said. 'Could you repeat that? I was miles away.' A pleasing scattering of gasps and angry mutterings. The Doctor decided to push it. 'I was just admiring the architecture – it's so wonderfully intimidating.'

‘Doctor,’ said the Bailiff, ‘you’ve been accused of the worst crime this court has seen in its lengthy history.’ Scattered cries of

‘hear, hear’. ‘How do you plead?’

‘I refuse to plead,’ said the Doctor. ‘I don’t recognize this court.’

‘This is the highest court in the Empire,’ someone called out.

‘How can you fail to recognize it?’

‘I’ve never seen any of you before in my life,’ said the Doctor.

‘It might help if I didn’t have that wretched light in my eyes.’ He looked up to the beam’s source. ‘Shut that off!’ he yelled.

After a moment, and the light obediently snapped off. More mutterings from the court. Remarkable the effect a bit of shouting could have on people. ‘That’s much better,’ he said. 'Now I can see you all properly. I’d like to thank you for coming here tonight. I –’

‘Doctor!’ thundered the Bailiff. ‘You must enter a plea!’ He was an absolutely enormous man, wearing Adjudicators’ robes and bearing a huge ceremonial sword, signing with sharp gestures of his great hands.

The voice was coming from a balloon-shaped drone. Three gun nozzles emerged from the metallic shape, covering every corner of the room. ‘If you continue to obstruct these proceedings, a charge of contempt will be added to your record.’

‘Regicide *and* contempt of court? I’ll never get a job with a record like that.’

Someone in the audience called, ‘I think we can move on to the sentence.’

‘I demand a retrial!’ shouted the Doctor.

‘You haven’t had a trial,’ said the Bailiff.

‘Exactly my point!’ said the Doctor.

‘But you admitted killing the Empress,’ someone called out.

‘Any more of that and I’ll have this court cleared!’ retorted the Doctor.

‘You confessed!’

‘Hearsay.’

‘I was there!’

The Doctor said, ‘It was under duress.’ He was quite amazed that the two armoured guards who’d brought him in hadn’t thumped him yet. He glanced up at the bulky chap to his right.

For a moment he thought he saw a movement under the skin beneath the man’s chin. He squinted up at him until the guard shifted uncomfortably, as though the Doctor’s stare might shift some of the blame on to him.

‘Duress had nothing to do with it,’ insisted the Bailiff.

‘Of course it did,’ said the Doctor. His eye was caught by a flash of metal in the audience – gone in an instant. He felt a prickle down his spine. What was going on here? ‘Intergalactic regulation four eight one, paragraph one, subsection forty-five, paragraph nine. “A person surrounded by armed guards pointing guns at him or her and shouting a lot shall be considered to be under duress.”’

‘There’s no such regulation!’

‘All right then,’ said the Doctor. ‘I demand a trial by combat.’

‘What?’ said the Bailiff.

‘Anyone care to step outside?’ said the Doctor, looking around.

Here and there he caught flashes of movement, like something crawling around the edge of his field of vision. Any moment now. ‘I’m proficient in hand-to-hand combat, blades, custard pies and the Bohemian teaspoon.’

‘That is enough!’ boomed the Bailiff. The whole court fell silent, even the Doctor. ‘The charge has been read. In the face of a prior confession and overwhelming evidence, the regulations allow me to bypass the plea. Doctor, by the power of the Imperial Court, I sentence you to –’

The monsters arrived.

It was the Duke Adeleke who died first. He was suddenly covered in spikes, long, curved structures like overgrown fingernails, bursting out through his skin. He stood up and roared.

No one screamed. No one even moved. Everyone turned to look at the Duke, as though he'd said something rude.

'Oh,' said Genevieve, her voice clear in the silent courtroom.

'Shit!'

The man sitting next to her, a minor official, burst into flames.

He stood up on his seat, the fire running over his entire body, and clawed at her, trying to get past her.

A Marquess howled and twisted into a fat, half-snake shape, sliding along the top of the desks. A guard burst out of his armour, growing fur and hundreds of eyes, and started climbing up the seats.

The courtroom was suddenly full of them, humans distorting into attack creatures. The guards were overwhelmed. As the 176

Doctor was struggling out of his chains, he saw a young Adjudicator being crushed by the Marquess as he tried to defend the Council, her heavy body twined around his as she squeezed.

His face disappeared in her coils.

The chains dropped to the floor. That had taken almost fifteen seconds.

Councillors were running for the exits, screaming. One woman ran straight into a monster with eight arms. It ripped her in half and threw her aside; she was in its way.

Duke Walid had clambered to the very back of the tiers of seats, and was shooting at the monsters as they climbed up after him. The Doctor saw the pattern of the fight – it was the Duke they were after. Everyone else was just collateral damage.

The Bailiff landed on him.

The Doctor tried to squeeze out from under the massive Adjudicator, but the Bailiff grabbed his arms, forcing him flat against the floor. The man and his armour weighed a ton, squashing him. He could hardly get a breath.

He turned as best he could to look at the Bailiff. Why bother with the prisoner, when the whole courtroom was full of monsters? Devotion to duty was one thing, but –

The man's eyes had turned into mouths. His face stretched as they widened, becoming maws, filled with shark teeth, row upon row of needles pointing into his skull.

The Doctor struggled uselessly as the mouths dipped towards him. 'Listen!' he shouted. 'You don't need to do this! Break free!'

Someone shot the Bailiff, right through the eye. Mouth.

The Doctor clawed his way out from beneath the heavy corpse.

The Bailiff's drone hovered down to scan him, its three guns still smoking. They were projectile weapons, very no-nonsense. If its scan took in internal detail and decided he had also mutated into a hostile alien, he'd be next.

The drone took off, its guns spinning to spit hot lead at the monsters.

The Doctor leapt up, stumbled over the corpse of a stenographer, and ran towards the pyramid of monsters clawing 177

their way up towards Walid. He was barely holding them back, pumping shot after shot into the group, perhaps a dozen of them.

He almost collided with Genevieve, clambering down the seats.

She elbowed the werewolf in the stomach, hard, ran to the Bailiff, and snatched up his ceremonial sword in both hands.

She aimed a massive blow at the backs of the monsters nearest her, severing the spine of the werewolf, almost toppling over with the force of her own swing. The monsters turned in surprise.

The Doctor ran up the seats to one side, just out of the monsters' reach. He heard Genevieve roaring as she wielded the weapon. It was far too heavy for her, but she knew what she was doing.

What she was doing was distracting them so her boss could get away.

The Doctor wished his pockets had not been emptied quite so thoroughly. A handful of ball bearings or a firecracker would be very useful right now.

The snake Marquess had wriggled to the top of the pile of attackers, protected from Genevieve's sword and Walid's pistol by the bodies. She shot out from beneath them, grabbing the Duke's ankles.

The Doctor hurled the chains he was carrying at the serpent.

They tangled around its fat body, catching under one stunted arm.

The Doctor pulled backward as hard as he could, just barely enough to loosen the thing's grip.

The Duke got his balance back and put three shots into the snake's body. Blood puffed out in a cloud of vapour as the Marquess fell back, jerking the chain from the Doctor's hands, crushing the monsters beneath her.

It had taken the Imperial Guard thirty seconds to respond.

Doors opened all around the room, and soldiers and Adjudicators started pouring in. They took one look at the monsters and opened fire.

Genevieve ducked. The Duke leapt to safety. One of the monsters tore itself loose from the crowd and the hail of plasma fire and landed squarely on the Doctor.

It had been a woman. Now she had an exaggerated jaw, heavy enough to hold the sabre teeth she'd been given, muscles bulging 178

in her neck as she panted. Her claws snatched at his coat and arms as she tried to climb over him.

'Wait,' he said. 'Listen to me.'

Her green eyes stared at him in panic. She grabbed his jacket and pulled and pushed, sharply, so that his head ricocheted off the hard edge of the seat.

The Doctor woke up on board a shuttle. 'You were dreaming,'

said Genevieve.

'Was I?' he sat up.

'Your eyes were moving, and you kept muttering things. I couldn't understand them.'

The Doctor sat up. He could see clouds out of the window.

‘The Duke,’ he said. He shut his eyes. ‘Am I remembering rightly? Were we attacked in this timeline?’

‘The Duke is well. He had some minor injuries. Are you sure you’re all right?’ Genevieve shrugged uncomfortably. There was an inflatable cast on her arm.

‘It doesn’t go with what you’re wearing,’ said the Doctor.

‘It’ll come off tomorrow,’ she said. ‘We were a lot luckier than the people who… changed. How’s your head?’

The Doctor put his hands on top of his head. ‘Round,’ he said.

‘Where are we going?’

‘The Duke’s offices. A few thousand miles from the Imperial Palace. We’ll be there in an hour. Try to get some sleep. There’ll be a lot to do.’

The Doctor looked out of the window. ‘Have you ever noticed,’ he said, ‘that the clouds on terraformed worlds have a slightly geometric look?’

Genevieve knocked on the door. She waited patiently, then knocked again.

‘I’m in the bath!’ called the Doctor.

‘I know,’ said Genevieve. ‘You weren’t answering the terminal. I thought you’d drowned.’

‘You could have checked this very embarrassing security camera… oh,’ he said.

‘Bubble bath’s wonderful, isn’t it?’ she called. ‘Very popular throughout the Empire.’

‘Madam,’ said the Doctor, his voice distorted by echoing around the tiles, ‘can I assist you in some way?’

‘The Duke is anxious to speak with you,’ said Genevieve. She sat down, leaning against the door, unable to keep a mischievous grin off

her face. ‘There’s a great deal to discuss.’

‘I’m not coming out there,’ said the Doctor. ‘Someone will execute me.’

‘Actually, that’s pretty unlikely. For the moment, at least. The Duke has demanded that the Council – what’s left of it, anyway –

hold a full investigation into both the Empress’s death and whatever happened in the courtroom.’

She waited, but all she could hear was splashing. ‘Doctor?

What *did* happen in the courtroom?’

‘I’m not completely sure,’ he said. ‘Tell me – the people who changed. Were they all registered psis?’

‘Yes, they were,’ said Genevieve, impressed. She’d just sneaked a look at that report half an hour ago, while the Duke was sleeping. ‘Though few of them had measurable powers. The Psi Registry tracks recessive genes as well as actual powers. If there was a conspiracy, it was a very serious one. The Imperial surgeons say that none of them could have survived the changes to their bodies.’

‘I thought you needed Quoth to do that,’ mused the Doctor.

‘Quoth?’

‘A subatomic life form with the power to alter matter. They can be enslaved to produce all sorts of unlikely results. But I don’t think the Quoth have anything to do with this.’

‘You’ve seen something like that before, then,’ said Genevieve.

‘That’s true of an alarmingly large number of things,’ said the Doctor. ‘Sometimes my life is like a series of repeats.’

‘We’re very lucky to have you, Doctor,’ she called. 'Now of all times, the Empire needs expert advice.’

‘Flattery will get you everywhere,’ said the Doctor. ‘Except perhaps into this bathroom. Just remember not to let anyone cut off my head, please.’

‘I wouldn’t worry. A full Council investigation ought to give you five years at least.’

‘You ought to get anyone with psi powers away from the Duke,’ he said.

‘That’s being arranged now. Most of them will be keen to go once they realize the danger they’re in.’

‘It’s obvious that whoever’s behind this was after Duke Walid.

They were quick to move once the Empress was dead.’

Genevieve frowned. ‘The House Armand?’

‘Possibly. I doubt it.’

‘Duke Armand is the other surviving contender for the throne.

There are a few others, but no one with a really strong case. If the vote goes against Walid, Armand will be the next Emperor.’

‘Hmm…’ Genevieve had a mental image of the Doctor sinking further into the tub, the water coming up over his ears as he thought deeply.

She glanced up at Walid, who was standing against the opposite wall, his arms folded. The Duke smiled, his mismatched eyes twinkling with amusement.

Genevieve got up. ‘Enjoy your bath, Doctor,’ she called. ‘I’ll leave you in peace.’

2

Tethys

13 June 2982

Chris spent thirty minutes in the fresher, a real hot-water shower, using up two bars of guest soap. After weeks of travel on cargo freighters and pirate ships, economy class in a standard passenger transport was luxury.

He emerged from the cubicle into the steamy bathroom, scrubbed pink and humming 'I Heard a Rumour'. He filled so much of the tiny room that he kept knocking his elbows against the walls and the sink when he tried to dry himself.

He put his head around the door. 'Um, Roz?'

She was sitting at the terminal with her back to him. 'Was that banging noise you?'

'Yeah. Do you mind if I finish drying off out here? I won't take a minute. It's just that there's not much room –'

'Get out here. I've busted scarier things than you in a towel,'

she said, still without turning around.

He stepped out and frantically dried himself off, tugging on his boxers and the nondescript blue suit he'd bought from the on-board duty-free. Roz didn't turn around. He lay down on the bed, his feet dangling over the edge.

'Anything interesting?' he said.

'Here and there,' said Roz, turning in her seat. 'I'm just reading the news. While you were in the shower, someone killed the Empress.'

'What?' Chris stared at her.

'There are a lot of garbled reports coming out of Janus. Some of the Council were killed, too.'

'Is it a coup?'

'Not quite,' said Roz. 'The Council are still in charge. They're debating who the successor will be.'

'Heck. The Empress. Do they know who did it?'

‘One report said they’d caught the assassin, but that his or her identity was being kept tightly under wraps. That might be another way of saying they have no idea who did it.’

‘Mom’s going to hate this. She was always keen on the royals.

Jeez, the *Empress*. What are we going to do?’

‘Nothing. Nothing to do with us. We keep looking for Zatopek.’

‘I wonder what the Doctor’s doing.’

Roz’s mouth twitched. ‘He’s probably on Janus, taking tea with the Council and offering to solve their murder mystery for them.’

A chime sounded softly. Roz’s terminal said, ‘Ladies and gentlemen, we will shortly be passing over Odysseus Crater on our way to Ithaca City. For an excellent view of the Crater and the Temple of the Goddess, please take a seat in the port-side viewing chamber. Thank you.’

‘Do you want to see?’ asked Roz.

‘Sure. I’ve never been to the Temple.’ Chris sat up and started tugging on his shoes. It was then that he realized he could see the whole room reflected in the terminal screen.

There were a dozen passengers in the viewing chamber. It was a thick bubble protruding from the ship’s hull, giving them a wide view of the landscape moving below. Sharp lines and shadows, details emerging from the pattern of light.

There was a strange feeling in the small crowd, a kind of camaraderie. They were all thinking the same thing, all thinking about the Empress, wondering how life was going to change.

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The ship had already passed the lip of the crater when Roz and Chris came in. There were two rows of seats. They sat at the back. Chris found he had a vague urge for popcorn.

‘It’s huge,’ said Roz. They were looking out over the vast, worn plain of the Odysseus Crater, four hundred klicks across.

The Temple of the Goddess was a glittering collection of lights, precisely in the centre of the crater, easily visible in the airless night

sky.

‘You know what it reminds me of?’

‘Aulis Crater,’ said Roz.

They both shifted in their seats, uncomfortable.

It took fifteen minutes for the transport to get close enough to the Temple for a good look. A circular building with four spokes, a tall, sharp cone rising from the centre.

All the holograms and sims didn’t compare to the building itself, real and stark against the starry sky. The largest religious building in the solar system. The home of the Goddess, the heart of the Adjudicators. Chris felt a chill down his spine as they passed almost overhead, the tip of the cone pointing up at them like a finger.

‘Blasphemous,’ murmured Roz.

‘What?’

‘I was just thinking,’ she said. ‘If there was… another Nexus.

Under the Temple. If this was another fake crater.’

‘I didn’t think you were a believer,’ said Chris.

Roz tilted her head to one side, watching the landscape. ‘There are some things that shouldn’t be messed with.’

‘Yeah,’ said Chris. ‘Let’s hope there was only the one.’

The Ithaca Chasma was a massive gash in the moon’s icy surface, a hundred klicks wide, five deep. It wrapped around three-quarters of Tethys. Chris and Roz were still in the viewing chamber when the passenger ship passed over its edge. In the distance they could see Ithaca City.

‘Looks like a kid’s toy box,’ said Chris. The city was a knot of buildings and lights, one huge dome covering the city centre, dozens of small domes and shapes clustered around it like 184

building blocks. And around those, hundreds and hundreds of spacecraft.

Chris grinned and got up, walking right down the front, almost

pressing his nose against the insulated hyperglass. Roz followed him down, taking a front-row seat.

'Look,' he said. 'There's an old Indigenous Class carrier, in for repairs. And there's a whole flock of those brand-new Vipers.

Looks like they're having their weapons fitted. And look! Holy cow! The *Gulf of Tonkin*! Look at the *size* of that baby!'

As they drew closer to the city, the transport slowly cruising down, they could see the flags. Stiff plates of metal at half-mast.

Some of the domes were painted with alien symbols.

'Ladies and gentlemen, please return to your quarters. We'll be arriving in Ithaca City in ten minutes. Please be ready to disembark. Thank you for flying Solar Transport.'

Neither of them was carrying much. Roz had brought a small bag of essentials; she stopped in the spaceport to buy a few more bits and pieces, while Chris thumbed through the spaceship magazines in the newsagent's.

'Do you want to grab a hotel room first, or have –' she looked at her chronometer '– lunch?'

'Let's have lunch,' said Chris. 'Get the feel of the place.' He held up the book he'd bought, the *Lonely Galaxy Guide to Tethys*.

They took the slidewalk to the city centre. The most expensive hotels and shops were right in the centre; the price got lower the closer you got to the edge of the dome. 'You pay for sky,' said Roz.

And it was sky. During the day, a constant simulation of Earth weather was projected on the surface of the dome. It was surprisingly convincing – though the liquid-crystal clouds would always threaten, never rain.

The Ithacans were a mix of human and alien – lumbering Martians, Skags in overalls, bulky Hith – jostling elbows and appendages in apparent unconcern. On Earth, the aliens would have been in little groups by themselves, or alone, keeping to one side, eyes fixed on the ground. Or they'd have shuffled or slid up 185

to you, asking for spare change. Here they were literally just part of the crowd.

Chris was reading the guidebook, miraculously avoiding collisions. ‘Here’s a good place,’ he announced. ‘A Jeopard bagel bar.’

They got off the slidewalk and went in. It was a small place done up in simulated wood, with a small crowd at the counter, selecting ingredients from the display.

The Jeopard serving them was a skinny, muscular cat-man, wearing white shorts and sleeveless top, slicing bagels with a knife gripped in thick fingers. As Chris watched, the alien skewered an olive on a slender claw and used it to garnish someone’s salmon sandwich.

The Jeopard gave him a small, round smile, careful not to show his fangs. He had very short, fine grey fur, subtly patterned.

‘What can I get for you?’ he said.

‘Two bagels, one plain and one with peanut butter and mashed banana, and two incredibly strong coffees, please,’ said Chris.

‘Yes, sir!’ said the Jeopard. ‘Eat here or take away?’

Chris looked around. Roz had already taken a seat, and was reading the guidebook. ‘To eat here.’

‘OK. Have a seat and I’ll bring it to you.’

Chris sat down. Roz didn’t look up. ‘Any help?’ he said.

‘I think we should try the Martian Quarter,’ said Roz.

‘Do you think Zatopek is likely to have gone to ground there?’

‘He could be anywhere,’ said Roz. ‘But remember, we’re looking for someone who looks just like the Doctor.’

‘Hey, that’s right,’ said Chris. ‘He’s got some serious history with those folks.’ He glanced over at the Jeopard, who was filling a jug with frothy milk. ‘Didn’t he once mention –’

‘He stopped the Jeopards from invading their neighbouring planet,’ said Roz. ‘A year later the Empire swept in and conquered both worlds.’

Chris tried to read the guide’s screen. ‘Is that all in there?’

‘Not quite.’ Roz lowered her voice. ‘There’s an entry on the conquest

of Jeopardy.' She handed him the guide.

'It was only ten years ago,' said Chris. 'After we left. It says there are only a few hundred thousand Jeopards.'

'Small planet.'

'They mustn't have bothered to indenture them.'

Roz jerked her head, and Chris saw that the Jeopard was heading for them with a tray.

'Let's split up,' said Chris.

'After lunch,' said Roz.

The Martian Quarter was a separate dome. The slidewalk passed through a series of force fields, each one an airlock, allowing you to acclimatize. The air was cold and thin, the 'sky'

was violet, and half the buildings were under the ground.

There were just enough humans to reassure Roz that she didn't stand out too much. She went from shop to shop, showing the tall reptiles the two photos she was carrying. One of the Doctor, one of Zatopek, just in case.

First chance she got she picked up a heat ray. It was a smaller version of the standard Martian weapon, designed for human hands. Nasty little bugger: you couldn't set it to stun. Still, now she felt less underdressed.

Most of the shops had a symbol hung outside which she didn't recognize, a stylized figure in clay or sometimes brass. The guidebook said it was a symbol of mourning.

After a couple of hours she took the weight off her feet in an almost empty bar. The menu was mostly Martian adaptations of human food, lethal curries and salsa and strong, bitter drinks. She ordered a coffee and a plateful of cakes to take the edge off.

'Have you seen either of these men?' she asked the bartender.

The Ice Warrior shook his lumpy head.

Roz sat down with her coffee. It tasted like dregs – she was surprised it wasn't melting through the cup. She popped one of the little cakes into her mouth and took another look at the guidebook.

A Martian stepped up to her table, looming overhead. Big green man. 'I'm fine, thank you,' she said, not taking her eyes off the book.

'You're an Adjudicator,' said the Martian.

Roz looked up at the seven-foot hulk and decided to play dumb. 'Huh?' she said.

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'Adjudicator,' said the Ice Warrior. 'But not a local Adjudicator. On the trail of a couple of suspects.'

'You got it wrong, bemmie,' said Roz. 'Uh, no offence. I'm just trying to find my uncle.' She took out the photos. 'See, that's him and his boyfriend. Have you seen them?'

'An Adjudicator who isn't aware of the local situation,' said the Martian. He sat down opposite her. Damn, he was between her and the door. 'But then again, who is?'

'Look, friend,' she said. 'What are you talking about?'

'You see,' said the Ice Warrior, 'the local branch of the Adjudication force has made some very special connections.

That's why I'm no longer one of them.'

Roz looked at him. 'You were an Adjudicator?'

'For ten of your Earth years,' deadpanned the Martian.

She sat back. 'They've got different hiring policies here than on Earth,' she said.

'Indeed. Don't continue following this man.' The Ice Warrior pointed at the photo of 'the Doctor'. 'An honest officer of the law will quickly be detected and eliminated.'

'If there's a conspiracy, how do you know I'm honest?'

'If you were not honest, you would not need to seek this man.'

‘Do you know who he is?’

‘No,’ said the Martian. ‘But I know that as soon as he arrived in this city, he made contact with the Adjudicators and their connections. Then he disappeared.’

‘You’re watching them.’

‘I am.’

‘Why?’

The Martian said, ‘I have connections as well.’

‘Were you sent to warn me off?’ said Roz.

‘To be truthful – I don’t want any more honest Adjudicators to be lost. But you have nothing to fear from my connections, I assure you.’

‘Who are you working for?’

‘No one. I am freelance, as are you. That is why you have nothing to fear from my connections.’

Roz nearly believed him. She pushed the photo forward. ‘Do you know where he is?’

‘No,’ said the Ice Warrior. ‘I advise you again to avoid him.’

‘Thanks for the advice,’ said Roz.

‘I also advise you to avoid the square, blue-coloured cakes.’

‘Why?’ Roz glanced down at her plate. ‘Are they poisoned?’

‘No,’ said the Martian, getting up. ‘But they’re terribly fattening.’

The Jeopard still hadn’t stopped shaking. Chris sat down on the bed next to him, wondering what the hell to say.

The room was small and tidy, with a single window facing out on to the street. From downstairs, the rich smell of coffee drifted up to the room.

The Jeopard clutched a mug of cappuccino, barely able to drink it for

the trembling. He took another slug of the cooling coffee.

On the table, there were a couple of magazines, an alien artefact which was probably a vase, and two photos. The Jeopard reached out and picked up the picture of the Doctor.

'OK,' he said. 'He's after us again, isn't he?'

'No,' said Chris. 'Calm down, calm down.'

The Jeopard finished his coffee in a sudden gulp. 'What do you want from us?' he said.

'Look, I'm just trying to find him,' said Chris. 'He's not here because of the Jeopards. He's not here at all. You see the other photo? That man is disguised as the Doctor.'

The Jeopard leant forward, stroking his ears with his hands. 'I was there when it all happened, you know,' he said. 'I was in one of the landing parties. The Jithrai didn't know what had hit them.

We'd sent a few ships over to explore, and they'd always managed to avoid us. We were just going to walk in and take over that planet.'

'And then the Doctor arrived,' said Chris.

'And then he arrived. He didn't do anything. But suddenly the Jithrai weren't frightened any more, they weren't confused. If we wanted their planet, we would have had to kill them. Thousands of them!'

Chris took the mug away before the Jeopard could drop it. The alien looked at him with haunted eyes, pupils dilated in the low 189

light. 'And then you came, and you killed every last Jithrai.

Every last one of them.'

'I came?' said Chris.

'The humans came,' said the Jeopard. 'I'm sorry, I know you don't all agree. When we saw what had been done to the Jithrai, we surrendered right away before they started killing us as well.'

The Jeopard put his face in his hands in a very human gesture.

Chris instinctively put an arm around the cat-man's muscular shoulders. It seemed to be the right thing to do. The alien moved

closer to him, the trembling starting to quiet.

‘How did you end up here?’ said Chris, after a few minutes.

‘I was indentured for five years,’ said the Jeopard. ‘I was a cook aboard the *Renoir*. They tried to train some of us as soldiers. But we can’t do that. We *can’t*.’

‘All right,’ said Chris. ‘It’s all right.’ He gave the alien’s shoulders a squeeze.

The Jeopard picked up both photos. ‘If any of my people had seen the Doctor – or this disguised man – believe me, I’d know about it. Everyone would be packing to leave.’

‘Why?’ said Chris. ‘What do you think he’s going to do to you?’

‘What did he do to the Jithrai? They were totally different.

Assertive. He infected them.’

‘Maybe,’ said Chris. ‘Or maybe he just brought out something they already had inside them.’

The Jeopard looked at Chris. It wasn’t an angry look: it was bruised. Ten years spent serving humans, millions of miles from home, had left a mark that would never be erased. ‘You tell him,’

he said. ‘If you ever find him, the real Doctor. You tell him about the Jithrai. Tell him they’re all dead now.’

‘Right,’ said Chris, making a mental note never to mention it.

Chris was waiting in a shopping mall when Roz got back. He sat on a bench, totally absorbed in *Heavy Cruiser Weekly*. He looked up guiltily to discover her standing there. ‘Hello,’ he said.

‘Any luck?’

‘No,’ said Roz. ‘I’m glad we didn’t plan on enlisting the local Adjudicators, though.’

Chris put his magazine in his pocket. ‘Let me guess. They’re in on it.’

‘Zatopek’s gone to ground, apparently with their help.’

Chris said, ‘Acting under orders?’

‘Acting on behalf of someone… Everyone’s acting on behalf of someone. How about you?’

‘I’m acting on behalf of my stomach.’ He got up. ‘I didn’t find a thing. Let’s get something to eat. I’m starving.’

They walked back along the street. The dome was showing an early evening, the sky hologram slowly fading to reveal the real sky, pitch-black scattered with perfect, untwinkling stars.

‘There’s the Jeopard café,’ said Roz.

‘Um, maybe we better not go there,’ said Chris.

‘Whatever.’

As they were passing, the Jeopard ran out of the café. He loped up to them through the thinning evening crowd. ‘Hey,’ he said.

‘What is it?’ said Chris.

The Jeopard’s fur was standing on end. ‘Someone saw him. I could tell them not to leave Tethys, because it’s someone in disguise, isn’t it?’

Chris nodded. ‘Do you know where he is?’

‘Yes, sir.’

Chris looked at the clock again. They’d been in the waiting room for two hours.

A pair of soft-spoken acolytes had met them in the Temple foyer. The floor and walls were marble – genuine marble, he bet, a rich brown colour shot through with white and grey. The light was muted, globes cupped in dark half-spheres at intervals around the walls.

There were no seats, only a statue of the Goddess, glistening in obsidian. The blindfold was so delicately crafted it looked as though it was made of real cloth. Her sword was real, the steel polished and sharp-edged. Chris had a strange urge to reach out and touch it.

In the silence the acolytes’ footsteps rang out for almost a minute before they appeared. Two of them, male and female.

They were wearing a modified version of the Adjudicator’s robes

– or was it the other way around? Chris suddenly felt underdressed in his street clothes, unworthy to be in the sanctuary.

It didn't seem to bother Roz. She talked to them like they were desk clerks, which they were, really, and demanded to see someone who could do something about something.

The acolytes had led them through long corridors – more marble, more silence – and left them in this room. It was like a sort of ascetic version of a hotel suite, spacious but almost empty.

There was a clothes cleaner and a bathroom but Chris wasn't surprised there wasn't a bar fridge.

The clock was a hologram, activated by eye contact, which meant that whenever you looked it was there. Chris had been trying to look at it out of the corner of his eye, to see whether it really was gone when he wasn't looking. Roz had been watching more news reports, flattened images sliding across the black glass of the coffee table.

'Six wars have broken out in twenty-four hours,' she said.

'Like brushfires. Only one of them in the solar system – the Antarctic Alliance lobbed a missile at the Horne Collective.'

Chris got up and wandered around, getting a root beer from the kitchen unit. 'You know, there's a bed back here,' he said.

Roz didn't look up from the table. 'I'm not that bored yet,' she said.

'Er,' said Chris, suddenly not sure what either of them was talking about. 'I meant that they might be planning to leave us here overnight. Even for a few days.'

Roz switched off the news, right in the middle of a report about the Youkali hostage situation. 'You're right,' she said. 'I wouldn't trust those acolytes as far as I could throw them.'

'That's probably how they feel about us.' He sat down opposite her.

'I'm sure it is. We're just grunts, chipping away at the coalface of law enforcement, with no formal training in legal theory. Most of this building is a library, you know – including a major Centcomp node. Computers and theoreticians churning out new laws and new commentary on the laws they just made up.'

‘You’ve been here before.’

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‘Nope. No one comes here.’

‘So how come you know so much about it?’ Chris tapped the table top. ‘You’ve been reading up.’

Roz shook her head. ‘I considered becoming an acolyte, for a while. Once. I read up on the place then.’

Chris shook his head. ‘I can’t see it.’

‘Neither can I. But you know. It was one of those twenty-four-hour plans, where the solution to all your problems is perfectly clear for just one day… It was after I killed Martle.’

Chris looked at her in surprise, then quickly looked away, fingers drumming on the edge of the table.

‘It’s not a dirty word,’ said Roz.

‘You never talk about that,’ said Chris.

‘I dunno,’ she said. She called up the news again. ‘It doesn’t seem like such a big deal.’

‘Hey.’

‘All this history,’ said Roz. ‘Happening all around us.

Everything shifting. The Empire’s coming apart at the seams. It’s like all those possibilities spraying out of the Nexus.’

‘But –’

‘Anything could happen. So none of it matters.’

‘I don’t believe that,’ insisted Chris. ‘We do matter.’

‘It’s all so small. Don’t you see? Martle and me. You and me.’

‘Stop it,’ said Chris. He stood up suddenly, almost knocking the sofa chair over. ‘You’re getting her attention.’

‘What are you talking about?’ said Roz.

Chris turned his head from side to side, trying to hear it more clearly. ‘She’s been watching us for hours,’ he said. ‘But now you’ve gone and gotten her attention.’

‘What are you talking about?’ Roz was up, wishing she had a weapon, looking around the suite to find something that would substitute. ‘You’re not making any sense.’

He knew he wasn’t. He couldn’t stop. ‘She’s on her way,’ he said.

Roz stood up. She could feel it too, now, getting closer. ‘Shit,’

she said. ‘The Brotherhood.’

Chris felt his head filling up. He sat down again. He knew they were being attacked, some kind of psychic attack, but he didn’t 193

care. That was part of the attack, of course, but it was hard to get excited about it. Probably they’d be here in a minute, or they might just keep pushing their way into their victims’ minds, looking for information. Or looking for the off switch.

He didn’t care. She was coming. And she wasn’t part of the attack. Oh no. They didn’t even know about her.

He blinked, wondering how Roz was doing. She was behind the other sofa, hanging on to it like a life preserver, and looking at something behind him. ‘Chris!’ she said.

‘Mmm-hmm?’

‘Chris! What’s the worst thing in the world?’

He thought about it. ‘I don’t know,’ he said. ‘I suppose it’s different for everyone. What do you see?’

‘She’s scaly,’ moaned Roz. She sounded like a little kid. ‘She can see me.’

‘Scaly?’

‘She’s a reptile. She can see me, she can see me.’

‘Don’t be fooled,’ said Chris. ‘That’s not her. That’s part of the attack.’

‘Help me.’

‘You don’t need help. You only think you see her.’

‘We’re going to die,’ said Roz. She pressed her face into the sofa. ‘They’re going to kill us. I don’t understand.’

Chris got up. There was something tugging at him, something stronger than the thick blanket of ennui that had settled over him.

He walked over to where Roz was cowering. Might as well.

‘Come on,’ he said. ‘She’s almost here. We don’t want to keep her waiting.’

He put his hands on Roz’s shoulders and gently pulled her to her feet. ‘No, no,’ she was muttering. Chris’s head was full of the soft humming, pushing him down to the floor to sleep, to dream and let out all his secrets. But the calling cut through all of that.

He turned.

There was a hole in the air, a spinning metallic hole. Light spilt out of it into the suite.

There was a female figure standing in the light. Dark stone. She held out a hand to them, her glassy body groaning with the movement. In her other hand there was a long, glittering sword.

Roz took a step towards her, reaching for the outstretched hand.

‘See?’ said Chris. 'Not scared now.’

They went to her together.

‘Oh no,’ said Roz. ‘We’re in bloody puterspace.’

Chris looked around. ‘But it’s the suite.’

‘No, look at it. It’s a VR model of the suite. Look at those lines

– it’s not even a good VR simulation. What the hell happened?’

‘We were under psychic attack. A gateway into puterspace opened up. We went through it.’

Chris looked down. He was standing next to his own body, lying face

down in the carpet. Roz lay next to him, her lips slightly parted. She looked as though she was asleep.

‘At least, our minds went through it,’ he said. ‘Whoever brought us here created this simulation so we could keep track of what’s happening to our bodies in the real world.’

‘Look at this,’ said Roz. She gestured him over to the suite’s door.

Chris couldn’t see what she meant for a moment. Then he saw that the sliding door was opening, very slowly. Very very slowly.

Just so you could see it.

‘They’re coming for us,’ he said. ‘But we’re in puterspace, so our minds are running much faster than theirs.’

‘You sound far too comfortable with all this,’ said Roz.

‘Haven’t you ever played a video game like this?’ said Chris.

‘In most games,’ said the statue sitting on the sofa, ‘all you can lose is your quarter.’

They whirled, staring at her.

‘Remember me?’ smiled the woman. The obsidian had to stretch and creak to accommodate the expression.

‘No,’ said Chris.

‘Whoever you are,’ said Roz, ‘you’re not the Goddess.’

‘No,’ agreed the statue. ‘I needed a form you’d instinctively trust.’

‘What if we were carrying some terrible secret guilt and knew we deserved punishment?’ said Roz.

‘Then you’d be even more keen on facing Justice,’ said the statue. Roz scowled, but Chris was nodding. ‘Well, enough of this banter. You’re both in very deep. I had to burrow into the Temple’s systems and I couldn’t grab much memory without setting off a lot of alarms. That’s why the simulation of the suite is a bit rough around the edges. I uploaded almost your whole minds. It took a surprising amount of room.’

‘Thanks,’ said Chris, meaning it. ‘The state those telepaths got us in, they could have done anything with us.’

‘Sneak attack,’ said Roz angrily. ‘I hate that stuff. There oughta be a law.’

‘There is. These are unregistered psis.’ The door had opened sufficiently for them to make out the faces of the people coming in. Three of them, in ordinary clothes, not robes. ‘They’re planning to interrogate you telepathically.’

‘And then kill us?’ said Roz.

The statue shook its heavy head. ‘They won’t need to. Not once they’re finished with you.’

Roz looked at her helpless body, lying on the floor behind the couch. ‘What do I do?’ she said, standing in front of the people starting to push through the door. ‘I’m a ghost!’

‘Hey, watch this,’ said Chris.

He pressed his thumb against the light control. Instantly, the room was pitch black. A moment later, everything was surrounded by a glowing white outline.

‘You can see now,’ said the statue. ‘They can’t. We need to get your bodies out of here.’

The slow-motion people were just starting to react to the blackness. Chris thumbed the door control, and the doors slammed shut behind them, cutting off the light from the corridor.

‘How are we going to do that? Can you put us back in?’

‘Of course.’

‘Wait,’ said Chris. ‘We’re controlling the lights and the door through the computer system, right? If you put us back in our bodies, we’ll lose that.’

‘I’ll keep you connected up. Trust me, I’m not going to cut and run this time.’

Roz looked at her suddenly. ‘FLORANCE!’

‘At your service. I owe you for helping me out on Dione. OK, let’s rock!’

‘Oh –’ said Roz.

‘Shit!’ said Roz, sitting up suddenly behind the sofa.

Chris pulled himself to his knees. ‘Get the crukking lights!’

shouted someone. Chris could see their outline in the doorway, pushing past the other two on the way to the light switch.

For an instant, the lights came back on. The psis blinked at Roz and Chris. Roz and Chris blinked at the psis.

Then Chris reached out through puterspace and switched the lights back off.

‘Let’s go!’ he shouted, vaulting the sofa. He threw his elbows up in front of his face and ran through the shouting psis, sending them flying.

Chris felt the psis’ minds snatching at them as they ran for it.

Oh no, you don’t, said FLORANCE, somewhere in the back of his mind. Her communication was like champagne bubbles, making him want to giggle even as he belted down the marble corridor.

He felt FLORANCE slap at the psis, felt their cold touch recoil away from him like a snapped rubber band. Roz passed him, leading the way as they ran.

Chris reached back and slammed down a blast door, almost squashing one of the psis. He watched through a securicam as the man skidded to a halt, colliding with the door.

‘Woo hoo!’ shouted Chris, as they ran into the foyer, hearing his voice echo back from everywhere. He could feel the whole building!

‘Don’t get too carried away,’ panted Roz, running in behind him. ‘You’re better with this computer stuff – which way do we go?’

Private shuttle bay, said FLORANCE.

‘Private shuttle bay,’ said Chris. ‘She’ll help us get through.’

‘I’ve always wondered,’ said Chris, as the shuttle headed for the great

black yonder, ‘why it was a *bat* out of hell.’

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Roz just hung on to the table, her jaw set. At this speed the shuttle’s inertial dampeners were straining to compensate for the acceleration.

‘I mean, I guess the idea is that the bat is in a hurry because it’s cooking.’

The shuttle hit the top of its steep parabola. Roz’s stomach protested in no uncertain terms for a moment. Then she felt the gentle drop as they started their descent towards Ithaca City.

Chris opened his eyes. He was sitting opposite her with his arms folded. ‘FLORANCE is flying it now,’ he said. ‘She says that maintaining the link is a bit much.’

‘Did she happen to mention whether there was any sign of pursuit? Any missiles, that sort of thing?’

‘We’re clear. They don’t even know we’ve gone. I mean, they don’t know that the shuttle is gone. So long as they don’t think to look out a window.’

‘What’s our ETA?’

‘About an hour.’

‘Right, I’m going to grab some shuteye.’ Roz put her feet on the glass table and lay back on the plush seating. ‘Give me a yell when we’ve landed. And try not to play with the controls.’

‘Yes, ma’am,’ said Chris wryly. He pointed at the aft curtain.

‘There’s an actual bed in the back, if you’d prefer.’

‘I wonder if there’s any champagne…’ said Roz. She pulled herself up and headed for the back section.

When she pulled the curtain open, there was a man standing behind it.

It was the man who’d been trailing her on Fury.

There was a split second when he could have shot her. Later she saw in her mind the tip of his electric thrower emerging from his sleeve,

ready for the moment she pulled the curtain back. It was only the fact that she opened it from the right side and not the left side that saved her.

She spun and the tip of the toe caught his arm, slamming it upward. He fell backward, landing on his arse in the kitchenette.

The oven door opened, knocking him on the head. ‘Ow,’ he said.

‘How’s that?’ said Chris.

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‘Oh, stop showing off,’ said Roz, pulling the thrower from the man’s arm. ‘Who are you? Screw that. How the hell did you get in here?’

‘Sorry about that,’ said FLORANCE, in the voice of the food heater. ‘I meant to tell you that I let him in, but things got a little busy.’

‘What?’ said Roz. ‘Who are you working for?’ she demanded.

‘Er,’ said the man. ‘I’m working for your sister.’

Roz couldn’t see Chris’s expression, but she knew it would involve big round eyes and probably an open mouth as well.

‘You’re what?’

‘Here,’ he said. He reached for his suit pocket. Roz brought the thrower to bear, but he was pulling a piece of paper from his pocket. ‘Relax,’ he said, holding it out.

Roz took it and read it. ‘Shit,’ she said.

‘Lady Leabie just wanted to make sure you were all right,’ the man said.

‘Keep your damned hands up,’ said Roz. She stuffed the paper into her pocket.

‘And she wants to know when you’re going to visit. Or call.

She says you could at least call once in a while.’

‘Well, I’ve been *busy*. I haven’t really had a chance. Look, who are you?’

The man took out his ID. James Llewellyn, House of Forrester, Internal Security. Roz shook her head and sat down.

‘So, he really is working for your sister?’ said Chris.

‘Yeah.’ She looked at the man. ‘You want a drink?’

Meanwhile

Black Sea Aquaculture Centre, 4 July 2982

Simon went in search of coffee during the refreshment break. He walked past tables heaped with seafood and algae, picked up a few futomaki, and finally discovered a steaming urn.

A woman in a Unitatus dress uniform stepped up. ‘Can you see any sugar?’ she said.

‘I’m afraid not,’ said Simon. ‘I wonder if they figured it would be better for our health.’

The woman smiled. She had a nice smile, and shiny red hair.

‘They probably just forgot. Earth Reptiles aren’t big on sweet flavours. I’m Joanna Morceli.’

Simon juggled his cup and spoon awkwardly and shook her hand. ‘Simon Frederson.’ His queue had fallen over his shoulder.

He straightened it.

She nodded. ‘Your people have done an extraordinary job, organizing this meeting.’

‘It took a lot of talking,’ admitted Simon. ‘And talking, and talking,

and talking.'

'Once you get an Earth Reptile chatting,' she said, 'it's hard to get them to stop. But it's even harder to get them to start talking in the first place.' She gestured with her cup at a circle of Reptiles, land dwellers and water dwellers. 'I never thought I'd see the Children of the Sea and the Seventeenth Third of the 200

Benevolent Triad having a conversation. Or the Monkey Boys in the same room as anybody.'

'Must have been the offer of free food,' said Simon. 'To tell you the truth, I didn't think they were going to show up.' He tried some of the coffee. 'I didn't realize the Unitatus were sending a representative.'

'I'm not really here for the negotiations,' said Joanna. 'We were worried there might be some triple-eyes about.'

Simon involuntarily glanced around the room. Indigenous Imperial Intelligence were firmly allied with the Empire's security resources. 'Don't worry,' said Joanna. 'We haven't identified any known agents.'

He relaxed. 'I still get nervous,' he apologized. 'Haven't been doing this very long.'

'We all get nervous,' said Joanna. 'You must be a natural, then.

What brought you on side?'

Simon looked around. 'Maybe we'd better mingle. I don't want the guests to think the humans are ignoring them.'

Joanna smiled, and called 'Miroka?'

Simon looked up as an Earth Reptile woman in a Unitatus uniform slowly walked up. 'Hi,' he said, astonished.

She inclined her head. 'Miroka, this is Simon Frederson.'

'I've heard of you,' said the Earth Reptile, formally.

'We were just talking about the reasons for what we're doing,'

said Joanna.

Miroka inclined her head. Simon wasn't sure what the gesture meant. 'Equal rights,' she said. 'Self-determination. Excellent reasons for the

Earth Reptiles to ally themselves with your cause.

But what about you?'

'Oh, you know,' said Simon. 'The usual story. Boy meets girl, girl is killed during vicious suppression of riot, boy turns radical and discovers unforeseen talent for violence. Tanj, I'm sorry, I didn't mean that to sound as awful as it did.'

Miroka didn't comment. 'I'm sorry,' said Joanna. 'You must have other talents besides violence, though.'

'I prefer this work to blowing things up,' he said. 'How about you?'

'I got sick of organizing charity events,' she said. 'Not many people realize that the Unitatus were originally founded to protect Earth from outside threats. We kept going for centuries after we were seriously needed. When the Wars of Acquisition began, we weren't just superfluous: we were a joke.'

Simon waggled his head. 'I guess I see what you mean,' he said. ' *We* were the threat.'

'Now the threat comes from inside the Empire, not outside,'

said Miroka. 'We must act together to protect Earth.'

'Not just to protect it,' said Simon. 'Things are going to be different.'

Port Elizabeth, Skag, 8 July

Vincenzi opened his eyes. The alarm would go off in four minutes.

He was remembering when the world had been much smaller, a single corridor, on Level 113 of Sir Guilliam Habibi's stack, Spaceport Six Overcity.

Presumably there had been a time when his entire world had consisted of his family's apt, but his earliest memories were of the corridor, particularly standing on the stoop while his mother gossiped with Mr Bobindinga from across the way.

He remembered the smell of long-chain polymers as their cleaning bot described a precise rectangular pattern on 'their'

section of the floor. He loved to get up early on a Saturday morning and watch the cleaning robots come out of the apts, each one scrubbing the corridor in front of its owner's door. The cleaning bots were all different, different makes, ages and customized, optimized and painted in bright colours. Some families went as far as to get sophisticated software plug-ins to make their bots move just that little more smoothly and stylishly than their neighbours'.

In his first memories Vincenzi didn't know what the bots were, just that they were bright and attractive and moved in an interesting manner. He wished the bots would come up out and dance every morning. When he asked his mother why they didn't, she shrugged and said that everyone had always cleaned the corridor on Saturday morning.

'What everyone?' he asked.

'Everyone round here,' said his mother.

As he got older, he began to realize that the dance of robots was more than just a community ritual – it was a contest. An unspoken competition between the families on the corridor to see whose cleaning bot was the best and who kept their patch of floor the smartest. And although it was hard to see how the final result was arrived at, everybody seemed to know the final score.

It was from this that Vincenzi learnt that some of the most important things in life are never spoken of.

Three minutes.

He was older by then, and his life had expanded beyond the corridor, to encompass other corridors and the Janinski Galleria and the place called Halfapark because it was obvious when you looked at the plans that it was supposed to be twice as big but had been chopped in half by a design error.

His school, LocEd 113HBSP6, was just off the park. That was where he learnt vital things, like it was better to get smacked twice on the hand by a human teacher than to get one static shock from a profbot, and the words to all six verses of 'Let the Goddess Watch Over the Empress'. He learnt to salute the flag and swear his fealty to his liege lord. As he was to remark on his second tour of duty on Orestes, 'There was an education in there somewhere, but I'm buggered if I

know what it was.'

He said this to a Skag maiden, who looked at him with pretty, uncomprehending eyes, and persuaded him to buy another bottle of overpriced, watery brandy.

He grew older. Bhubba, the senior of his two fathers, updated the holographic image of the family that adorned their doorway.

Then he took Vincenzi aside and, opening a bottle of ersatz Chianti, gave him the standard warnings against sex, drugs and loud music. And like the warning given by the first upright primate to its child, it was about a year too late.

For there was already loud music, and drugs of a kind, and even sex, albeit still only at the level of theory. Vincenzi's adolescent world was the whole North-West quadrant of Level 113, and sometimes up to 114, because there was a way past the ID checks if you were fast and clever, and Vincenzi was both.

But 114 was overrated, he thought, much the same as 113 only different and down on his own level there were plenty of things to do and, most of all, friends to do it with.

Two minutes.

He could remember that world, but it was no longer part of him. It was as though he'd been cut in half, like the park, his life sliced down the middle the moment he'd pulled that trigger and sent the lieutenant's head flying.

The Vincenzi before that moment still couldn't quite believe that space wasn't spacious, that with the whole galaxy to roam in he spent all his time wedged into tin cans or foxholes. Or in crummy barracks, like this one.

Stuck in those foxholes, he'd swapped jokes about the Skag home world, how it had to be like one giant brothel. Stupid kid.

Here, the Skags didn't shag you. They ordered you the hell out of your nice warm bunk and drilled you until your ears rang.

He was pulling on his uniform when the alarm went off. Ten seconds later the Skag *jaresht* was in there, a tall fix-fingered woman in a livid

red uniform, throwing sluggish soldiers out of bed and shouting, ‘Battle drill for the grunts, tactical drill for the officers, but first, a delicious breakfast and an ice-cold shower to wake you up! Come along, *chumanene*!’

Vincenzi hadn’t quite puzzled out what rank a *jaresht* was equivalent to. He had a suspicion it meant ‘shouter’. He’d never heard one of them speak below a hearty roar.

He was lacing his boots when the *jaresht* boomed, ‘Vinsensee!’

She was standing right in front of him. He hopped to his feet and said, ‘I hear you!’

‘I’ve got something for you, *chumanet*,’ said the Skagette.

‘Come along, come along.’

Vincenzi followed the *jaresht* out of the barracks. The training grounds were a wide, barren area between two rocky hills. For the first week, Vincenzi had thought the whole Skag moon was like that, before their first really long run had taken them into the valley next door. Evidently this area had been overfarmed so badly it was useless. The valleys all around were full of fat, healthy alien plants.

Vincenzi wondered whether the *jaresht* had been a farmer before the Empire had gobbled up her world, or whether she’d always shouted for a living.

She led him to the mess hall. A new shipment of recruits had arrived during the night; he’d been woken briefly by the sound of their retros. He wasn’t surprised to find them jammed into the mess hall, looking jet-lagged and nervous.

‘Mooooooller!’ called the *jaresht*. ‘Come along!’

A short, bulky woman detached herself from the other recruits and hurried to the Skagette’s side. ‘I hear you!’ she said.

Learning the ropes already, good.

‘Vinsensee,’ announced the *jaresht*. ‘Mooooooller is going to be your sergeant. Once the training is complete, it’ll be time to start putting the units together. I want her briefed by this afternoon.’

‘The COs are arriving today?’ said Vincenzi. ‘Today?’

‘Running ahead of schedule, *chumanet*,’ said the *jaresht*. ‘Get talking, have breakfast.’

Vincenzi shook Muller’s hand. ‘Welcome aboard. How’d they get you?’

‘Volunteered, sir,’ she said. ‘I was thrown out of the navy induction program for insubordination.’

Vincenzi blinked at her.

‘I thought I’d better tell you straight way, sir,’ she said. ‘How about you, sir?’

‘Ah,’ said Vincenzi. ‘Insubordination too, I guess.’

Muller nodded. ‘How’s the training been going, sir? Do you think we really have a chance to change things?’

‘Change things?’ said Vincenzi. ‘I think we have a chance at winning this war. But change things… Maybe things will be different afterwards.’

‘I hope so, sir.’

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3

Kibero

Kibero Patera, Io, 16 July 2982

Chris had been walking for three hours. He took out the map he’d been given, tracing a finger along his route… Grief, he’d covered only a fraction of the distance.

He was parched and his legs were starting to protest. He stuffed the map back in the pocket of his board shorts. There was only one thing for it.

There was a café just up ahead on the right. Chris stumbled inside and sat down at a table, one of a dozen, round dark circles hovering on miniature nullgrav generators. The table bobbed slightly when he leant on it, before firming up, positioning itself at a comfortable height.

It was the sixth café he'd passed on his trek around the Forrester house. 'Café' probably wasn't the right term. 'Dining area,' maybe. He'd seen employees and family members eating as he'd passed by.

He was determined to walk the whole of the outer hallway, a thirty-kilometre stretch of carpet and windows circling the building at its base. He'd started from the transport access tunnel, a long metallic tube stretching away across Io's barren surface, puncturing the crater rim.

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They called this part of the structure the Needle, and the palace proper was threaded through it, descending into the rock, shooting up into the sky, four hundred storeys in all.

And Roz grew up here. Somewhere, he bet, there was a nursery big enough to play football in.

'Can I help you, sir?'

Chris looked up. He'd been expecting a robot, but it was a waiter, a skinny middle-aged man in one of the house's uniforms.

Not a waiter. A servant. 'Um,' he said nervously. 'Can I get something to eat? I mean, a menu.'

'Certainly, sir.' The servant tapped the table top on the button marked MENU, previously hidden behind Chris's elbow. 'Shall I leave you for a moment to consider?'

'Oh, no, that's OK, can I please get…' The menu was all in

!Xhosa. There was a horrible moment as Chris realized he was going to have to ask for a translation. With a lurch of relief he realized that there was an icon for English at the bottom of the screen. He tapped

it. '…a cheeseburger. With fries. And a chocolate milk shake, please.'

'Your meal will be ready in three minutes, sir,' said the servant. He gave Chris a tiny bow and retreated.

Oh, man. This was difficult to cope with. This was way too big.

Bigger than a majorly expensive hotel. Bigger than a factory.

Bigger than the overcity block he'd grown up in.

And this was Roz's home. She could go anywhere here, except maybe the private apartments of one of the other Forresters.

And who the hell was he?

He thought he knew her, thought he *understood* that her family were rich, that they owned a *planet* for chrissakes. He'd watched *Lifestyles of the Obscenely Wealthy* – he knew what it was all about.

He'd really believed that it didn't matter, that she'd left this all behind to be an Adjudicator. But you couldn't leave something like this behind. It was too big.

Jesus, the time he'd kissed her. He was lucky she hadn't laughed in his face. Maybe she had – he'd fainted afterwards.

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The servant was back, bearing a tray. Chris wondered if he was supposed to leave a tip. 'Thanks,' he said, awkwardly. Another quick nod and the man was gone again.

On his walk he'd passed swimming pools and gymnasiums, cinemas and gardens, a zoo and an art gallery. He'd passed by areas of landscape meant to simulate half a dozen Earth environments and half a dozen more alien ones. Look to the right, and you saw sky, grass, birds; look to the left, and you saw rocks.

Deeper in the building there were laboratories, hydroponics plants, reprocessors, you name it. It was like an arcology. The map said the palace could survive for a year without any outside contact.

He finished his meal, wondered what to do with the tray, and ended up awkwardly leaving it on the table. He took the milk shake with him.

He walked for another hour. The palace was sparsely populated

– most of the people were servants, outnumbering the family members fifteen to one. He'd seen just one other person in the Needle, a woman jogging in the opposite direction. Family, probably, pureblood. She gave him a smile and a wave as she passed.

Every so often a transport would whoosh overhead. The ceiling was thirty feet up, curving over a shuttle tube suspended from a thick metal strut. No one seemed to walk, even the short distance between tube stops. After a while there was a certain sameness to it, he supposed.

The buzzing noise came from somewhere behind him, distant.

At first he thought it was another shuttle, but as the sound grew louder he realized it was something else. An engine noise, maybe? Robot cleaners? Go-karts?

It was hard to resist taking glances behind him as he walked.

The sound was taking for ever to catch up with him. Whatever it was, it was loud, audible from a long way away…

The buzzing became a roaring, somewhere close behind, just around the curve of the Needle's eye. Chris was just starting to wonder if he was in trouble when they came into view.

A pair of tiny biplanes. Child sized. Corridor sized.

Chris stared as the miniature aircraft sped towards him. There were two kids in each – teenagers, he saw, as they got close enough for him to really get a handle on the size. Three teenagers, one little kid. All of them whooping and laughing as they roared towards him.

They shot past him on either side, a deafening, Dopplered wall of sound. He laughed out loud as they screamed down the corridor, leaving him behind. Now *that* was the way to travel!

The kids were waiting for him at the next tube station, their toy aeroplanes parked to one side, up against the window. They sat on the steps that led up to the transport, giggling.

The eldest looked around eighteen, willowy and pretty with a big

smile. She stood up and waved at him with a white handkerchief as he jogged towards them. The others were a boy and girl in their mid-teens, and the little girl, who was maybe six or seven.

‘These are great!’ he said, coming to halt near the biplanes. ‘I would have given a limb to have one like this.’ He stroked the plane’s wing.

‘Watch it, mate,’ said the plane.

The children all giggled as he snatched his hand back. ‘I’m Chris,’ he said. ‘Chris Cwej.’

‘We know,’ said the middle girl. ‘You came here with Aunty Roz.’

Leabie’s kids. He should have guessed right away. Purebloods, with expensive corrected genotypes and bepples on top, he imagined. Healthy and strong and very beautiful.

‘I’m pleased to meet you,’ he said. ‘I wish I could fit into one of these planes.’

‘I’m Gugwani,’ the eldest girl said. She walked up to him, a slender figure in a cotton dress and red shoes. ‘That’s Somezi –’

the boy ‘– that’s Mantsebo, and the little one is Thandiwe.’

‘I’m not little,’ said Thandiwe. ‘I’m six.’

Something bumped the back of Chris’s leg. He turned, to see the red biplane. ‘You got security clearance?’

‘Check the guest list,’ said Chris.

The plane thought about it for a moment. ‘Yep, you’re cleared.

Just remember I’ve got my scanner on you. Right?’

Chris smiled at Gugwani, who beamed mightily in return.

Typical low-level AI, desperate to show it wasn’t anybody’s servant. ‘I’ll bet these planes never let you get up to anything,’ he said.

‘You’d be surprised,’ she said. ‘Do you like our house?’

Chris looked around. ‘Yes,’ he said, eventually. Prompting more fits of

giggles from the kids.

It suddenly struck him what they were laughing about. Stupid hick from the lower levels, gawping at the palace.

‘Don’t take it personally,’ the biplane told him. ‘They do this to everyone.’

‘But guys, I was going to walk all the way around the building.’

‘You can finish later.’

‘Are you sure we can all fit in this tube train?’

‘I’ll sit next to you.’

‘Can I sit on your lap, Mantsebo?’

‘Of course, child – up you go!’

‘Hey, Chris, look out the window as we go.’

‘Which section is your room in?’

‘Let me check the map… blue section, third level, corridor twenty-one, suite eighteen.’

‘See, you just type that into the controls, and it takes you to the nearest station.’

‘Stop wriggling, Thandiwe!’

‘Makes you dizzzzzeeeeee!’

‘I bet you kids spend all your time going round and round in this thing.’

‘No, the planes are better.’

‘Was it OK to just leave them there?’

‘They’ll put themselves away.’

‘Here we are!’

Chris and the four children piled out of the tube. They led him along through wide, carpeted hallways until they came to a door with a liquid crystal label: SUITE 18, MR CHRISTOPHER CWEJ.

The door slid back and they went inside. It was a huge, carpeted space like a hotel lobby, with a fountain set into the floor. There were doors at intervals around the walls. ‘OK,’ said Chris, ‘which one’s mine?’

The kids all grinned. A servant stepped up, a tall woman with white hair. ‘Welcome to your suite, Mr Cwej,’ she said. ‘Your map contains details of the services and facilities, but if you have any questions or requests, please ask a member of staff.’

‘Thanks,’ said Chris. ‘This whole thing is my room, isn’t it?’

‘Yes, sir,’ said the servant. ‘I hope everything is to your satisfaction.’

She was like something from a sim. It was all like something from a sim, or a video game. *Too Much Money! Live out your fantasies of wealth in this hi-rez VR environment.*

‘I’m going to have a shower,’ he said to no one in particular.

‘And then I’m going to go and see what Aunty Roz is up to.’

‘Yes, sir. Will you require assistance with the bathroom?’

He looked at her. ‘No, ma’am,’ he said, sending the kids off into fits of giggles.

‘Are you going to talk to me, or are we just going to lob balls at one another?’

Leabie caught the tennis ball she’d been bouncing up and down in her hand. Roz walked up to the net.

Leabie looked at her from the baseline. Her sister looked quite a bit like her, just not so worn around the edges. With all the time travel, Roz was now younger than her younger sister, but she looked and felt older.

Some of it was health treatments, but most of it was the lack of stress. Leabie was taller and her hair wasn’t turning grey. Go and chase round after the Doctor for a few years, thought Roz, and see how you come out.

Leabie walked up to the net. ‘Just because you’re losing,’ she said, with one of her small smiles.

‘You’re mad with me,’ said Roz.

‘Of course not! I’m delighted to see you.’

‘Come on, *usisi*.’

211

‘You ought to have come to me for help, darling,’ said Leabie.

‘I know you wanted to set out on your own. We’re all very proud of your work as an Adjudicator, of course. But when things became difficult, you ought to have asked for help.’

It might have been a bit difficult, thought Roz. I was up to my arse in Sloathes at the time. ‘I’ve been travelling.’

‘And that’s another thing,’ said Leabie. ‘We looked all over for you, but you’d just –’ she gestured, the ball flying out of her hand

‘– vanished! And now you suddenly pop up from nowhere. I asked Mr Llewellyn to keep an eye on you, because I wasn’t sure how you’d react to an offer of help.’

Once you started her talking, thought Roz, it was hard to get her to stop. ‘That’s why you put me under surveillance?’ she said.

‘Of course,’ said Leabie. ‘I just wanted to make sure you’d be all right. You’ve been busy, Roz. What are you up to?’

‘Oh, you know. Following up a few leads.’

‘Now, you’re the one who wanted to talk…’ Leabie smiled.

‘Let’s go and cool off.’

Leabie caught up with her in the rain garden, after changing out of her tennis gear. Roz was standing on one of the side paths, still in her white shorts and T-shirt, watching the rain fall among the slick leaves of the jungle plants. An artificial sun shower, tiny droplets of cool rain falling down.

It reminded her, perversely, not of the legendary forests of West Africa as it was supposed to, but of Little Chalfont, England.

The TARDIS stood among the plants, just one of the sculptures among the trees. ‘What is that thing, anyway?’ Leabie asked, walking up to

her.

‘Equipment,’ said Roz. ‘It’s not art. Why’d you put it down here?’

‘Well, if I put it in a vault, everyone will know it’s valuable.

This way, it’s disguised, whatever it is,’ said Leabie. ‘It was a tremendous surprise when it arrived with your note, *usisi*. We were all in a terrible flap.’

212

‘I checked my records,’ said Roz. ‘I was legally declared dead a year after I left. I didn’t know whether that was your doing, or the Doctor’s, or the Adjudicators’.’

‘Your Centcomp records were almost entirely destroyed.

Thandiwe believed you were dead, but I know the older children weren’t certain. I didn’t know what to think, and now, out of the blue, here you are back again… Why don’t you tell me what it is you’re trying to do?’ insisted Leabie. ‘I can help you. You know I’ve always wanted what’s best for this family.’

‘What now? What’s the future, Leabie?’ said Roz. ‘What’s going to happen to the Empire?’

‘I wish I knew,’ said her sister. She found a bench among the trees, and sat down. The artificial sun shower surrounded them, tiny droplets of cool water floating down. ‘It’s all up in the air. I can’t believe fighting broke out in the Imperial Palace itself!

There hasn’t been news for hours, almost a whole *day*.’ She sighed. ‘We live in interesting times. Did you know there are still security alerts out for yourself and young Mr Cwej? He was your partner, wasn’t he?’

‘Still is, really. He was Squired to me just before the riots started, and the Adjudication service blew up in our faces. We’re friends, now.’

‘Have you slept with him?’

‘No, I haven’t!’ said Roz. ‘Leabie, he’s half my age.’

‘Well, whatever difference does that make?’ Leabie poked Roz’s shoulder with her fingertips. ‘Go on, don’t tell me you’ve never thought about it.’

‘Leabie,’ insisted Roz, ‘I’m no closer to getting married now than when we last spoke.’

Leabie gave a girlish laugh. ‘Don’t be silly, I’m not asking if you’re going to *marry* him!’

‘Yeah,’ said Roz, ‘well, you wouldn’t, would you?’ She relaxed an angry fist, feeling the engagement ring pushing into her palm.

‘Do you remember the time I broke Twolumps?’

‘Twolumps?’ Roz thought about it for a moment, and suddenly burst out laughing. ‘That teddy bear bot of yours! The one with the misshapen ears.’

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‘I was just trying to fix them, and I pulled off half his head. I thought I’d wrecked him. So I brought him down here.’

‘That’s right. You hid him in the jungle.’

‘And you said it wasn’t fair. He was still moving around, calling my name.’

‘Well, it wasn’t fair. He was terrified to be without you.’

‘So you told Mama.’

‘I told Mama,’ said Roz. ‘And Twolumps was found and fixed.’

‘And I didn’t get to go on any trips for a month.’

‘Well,’ said Roz, ‘it wasn’t fair on poor old Twolumps.’

‘No,’ said Leabie. ‘You never used to let me get away with anything.’

‘True.’ Roz smiled. ‘How are your kids?’

‘The kids are just fine, they’re beautiful. You’ll meet them later. They’re terribly excited you’re here. I think they all raced off to track down your Mr Cwej. You know, to ask all about you.’

‘Oh, no,’ said Roz. She wiped her face, pushing the moisture back through her hair. ‘Thandiwe was a bit of an afterthought, wasn’t she? She can’t be seven.’

‘She’s six. Roslyn… there’s something you ought to know about her.’

Roz looked at Leabie. Her older sister didn’t say anything, playing the old game they were both familiar with. *Guess what I’m thinking.*

‘You didn’t,’ said Roz.

‘Thandiwe is more than your niece. She’s your clone.’

‘Don’t you need my permission to do that?’ said Roz.

‘Well,’ said Leabie, ‘it’s a bit late to worry about that now.

You’ll like her, Roz. She’s as bright as a button.’

‘And they say the aristos are inbred,’ said Roz. ‘You must have started right after I… disappeared. Decided to whip up a replacement, did you?’

‘We couldn’t replace you,’ said Leabie.

‘Thanks.’

‘No memory record.’

‘Oh, thanks.’

‘All we could do was try to plug the gap left in the family tree.

I worry, Roz. You don’t have my responsibilities. I wonder if you can understand. I imagine a time when there are no Forresters, when everything we’ve built up is washed away in some catastrophe. Or worse, just trickles away to nothing. The line must continue, as it has continued for a millennium.’

‘And you’ve found the ultimate way of keeping it going.’

Leabie looked at Roz. ‘We could have lost you. Again. Why didn’t you come to me for help?’

There was a discreet cough from a little distance. They looked up. A dark man in a servant’s uniform was waiting with a message. ‘What is it, Genneadiy?’ said Leabie.

He walked up. ‘Madam, madam,’ he said, nodding to each of them,

and handed her the message.

Leabie read it at a glance. ‘Oh my goodness! Duke Walid is coming here! Worse than that, he’s on his way!’

‘He’s coming here?’ said Roz.

‘Genneadiy, we must get to work at once!’ Leabie jumped up.

‘I want a banquet ready at nineteen hundred hours, and guest quarters ready for the Duke’s entourage. And I want our security stepped up.’ The servant was entering it all into a palmtop. ‘And no tomatoes. The Duke hates tomatoes. And check the guest database to find out what kind of music he likes – I can’t recall whether it was modern makossa or ancient dreamhouse. One of those is Duke Armand and we do *not* want to get it wrong. And another thing…’

Roz closed her eyes, feeling the droplets landing on her skin.

She was well out of this. Had been well out of this.

Leabie lined them all up for the Duke’s arrival, her sister and her children and an assortment of aunts and uncles and cousins.

Chris was there, standing off to one side, looking humble and terrified. Roz waved him over. She didn’t care if they all assumed he was her bloody consort.

Leabie had wanted him to wear a full Adjudicator dress uniform, until he’d pointed out that he didn’t represent the Adjudicators. She’d insisted on having a suit made for him, 215

though, a soft blue thing that fitted perfectly. He stood next to Roz, hands clasped in front of him, staring at the airlock door.

The kids were neatly lined up – even Thandiwe, who had far too good an idea of etiquette for a six-year-old. Bringing her up right, thought Roz, prim and proper. Gugwani was smiling, trying to catch Chris’s eye. ‘Everywhere we go…’ Roz muttered.

‘What?’ he whispered.

‘Nothing,’ she said. ‘Look, the shuttle’s finished docking.’

Leabie was hovering, nervous. ‘We’re all sorted out, then, Genneadiy? Of course we are, and it would be a bit late now if we weren’t. Deep breaths, everyone.’

The grand airlock door irised open with a hiss. The Duke's personal attendants were first through. One of them took out a little trumpet and blew on it. Roz heard a stifled giggle from one of the kids. She glanced at Thandiwe, who was glaring straight ahead, the model of seriousness.

'His Excellency, Duke Abu ibn Walid of Callisto.' The Duke stepped through, and his entourage followed, looking around and smiling. 'Her Excellency Lady Kirsten. The Lady Genevieve ap Gwalchmai.' There were a dozen more, walking in through the airlock as Walid shook Leabie's hand.

'I don't believe it,' said Chris.

'I do,' said Roz.

The Duke was making introductions on behalf of his staff.

'This is my chief personal secretary, this is my accountant and this is _'

'Hello, Doctor,' said Roz.

'Roz, Chris,' said the Doctor. 'I seem to have fallen on my feet again.'

Gugwani had somehow managed to arrange it so that Chris sat opposite her at the banquet. The two of them were chatting away, sitting on cushions at the low wooden table. Roz could swear the thing was half a kilometre long, seating the family members, the Duke's entire entourage and every minor noble, corporate and bureau chief who could get there fast enough.

Chris looked relaxed at last. Roz wondered if her niece had been ordered to flirt with him. Chris had enough sense not to tell 216

the girl anything he shouldn't. Let him enjoy himself for the time being.

The Doctor sat next to Roz, drinking tea and eating fairy bread.

'You know,' said Roz, 'we haven't had a chance to talk in weeks.'

'You're right. It was exhausting, keeping one eye on Iaomnet… and the other on me.'

Roz shook her head. 'We were totally taken in by Zatopek. I don't understand how he could have impersonated you so completely.'

‘At first,’ said the Doctor, ‘he was me. He must have gradually regained control, with time, and distance from Iphigenia.’

‘OK,’ said Roz, ‘he was you. What was inside that moon, a Doctor-making machine?’

‘Now, there’s a frightening thought.’ He smiled. ‘Once upon a time… that’s a good way to start the story. Once upon a time, there were unicorns and bread-and-butterflies, planets like giant apples and suns like red balloons. But since no sentient life had yet evolved, there was no one to notice they were impossible, so no one minded. And then along came the Time Lords.’

‘The Time Lords were the first sentient beings?’

‘The first to evolve in this universe, yes,’ said the Doctor. He finished his tea and poured another cup. ‘Back then we were the Shadow people, caught between the warm dark of magick and the cold light of science. Magick predominated for a long, long time.

And then Rassilon made his decision.’

Roz had forgotten her tomato soup, listening. Don’t think of it like a sitrep, she thought, think of it as a fairy story.

‘The world solidified around us, like water turning to ice.

Squeezing out the magick. But, like an ice cube, there were little cracks and bubbles. Psi was the last magick to survive, perhaps because it was the least impossible, the closest to science. The residue of psi became a network of ley lines, stretching through the universe in improbable directions.

‘It’s still there.’

Roz said, ‘And Iphigenia is… on one of the ley lines?’

The Doctor nodded. ‘The Time Lords were aware of the ley lines before the Wars began. We’d chosen to make the universe 217

rational. Its irrational citizens objected. So we turned the psi lines into weapons. A Distant Early Warning line that stretched through the galaxy, studded with receivers the size of mountains or even small moons, parabolic dishes disguised as craters.

Listening for eruptions of psi power beyond Gallifrey.’

‘Iphigenia,’ said Roz.

‘Yes. A quarter of the moon is jammed with Time Lord technology, riddled with access tunnels. They just built a fake crater over the top, so the Vampires wouldn’t notice, and left it there.’

‘They must have realized someone would notice. There must have been hundreds of Martiniques through the millennia.’

‘Remember,’ said the Doctor, ‘back then there were no other intelligent races. None that mattered, anyway, as far as we were concerned. Just the Time Lords, and our enemies. The residual horrors of the universe before this one, and the Great Vampires, sucking dry every planet they could reach.’

‘So the expedition came into contact with the ley line,’ said Roz.

‘A primary source of unimaginable psi power. A well of magick,’ said the Doctor. ‘Where everything that’s possible is boiling under the surface of the universe. Zatopek is working for the Brotherhood.’

‘Ah.’

‘When I realized what we were faced with, I insisted we leave right away. Zatopek and Iaomnet were very, very insistent. I warned them about the fate of the previous expedition. Close contact with the Nexus simply drove most of them mad, left one of them sliding through different realities, and left an N-gram burning inside Mei Feng’s brain. They already knew what had happened. I should really have just let them wave their guns about and make threats, but I was curious… I should never have got so close to the thing.’

‘Chris’s dream aboard the Hopper,’ said Roz. ‘He said it was as though a great wave of psi power washed out from the centre of the planet.’

‘When I came into contact with the Nexus, it released every potential possibility of my existence. Well, almost all of them. If 218

I dust off some of the mathematical manuals in the TARDIS

library, I can probably do the calculations. In any case, all those probabilities were thrown loose, spraying loose into the galaxy.

Some of them found places to settle. Zatopek was very close. As I recall, he was holding a needier to my ear at the time.’

‘So he turned into you,’ said Roz.

‘Not quite,’ said the Doctor. ‘Me, with some tiny difference.

Some decision I didn’t make, some road I didn’t travel… maybe that Doctor just had something else for breakfast for that morning. In any case, Zatopek’s own psi talents allowed him to gradually emerge.’

It was all starting to make sense, in a nonsensical way. ‘That explains the you that contacted me on Fury,’ said Roz.

The Doctor nodded. ‘The distribution of probabilities is chaotic, but broadly, the further you get away from the Nexus, the more bizarre they become.’

‘One thing I don’t get – why blow up Cassandra, but not Iphigenia?’

‘All TARDISes have a self-destruct device,’ said the Doctor,

‘but the cosmic ley lines don’t have such a convenient facility.

Blowing up the planet would leave the Nexus quite unharmed.’

‘And the N-forms?’ prompted Roz.

‘Mines,’ said the Doctor. ‘They didn’t just detect psi. They actively attacked it. Anything that wasn’t Gallifreyan. But the Time Lords didn’t pick up their toys when they were finished with them. There are still a small number of N-forms, usually damaged and insane, left lying about the galaxy. The ones which didn’t want to stop killing were the hardest to find.’ He stirred his tea aggressively. ‘Typical Time Lord blunder. Create something ludicrously powerful and then forget all about it. Decide you’re going to be entirely rational, and then have a psychic war which lasts for millennia and decimates half the galaxy.’

Roz shook her head. ‘I can see why you don’t go home at Christmas.’

‘I’d chew their ear off, for one thing. Each time I go back,’ he said, lowering his voice, ‘I don’t expect to be allowed to leave again. So far I’ve been lucky.’

She nodded. ‘Leabie’s been asking me why I never visit.’

They gave one another a what-can-you-do look. Roz said,

‘Maybe you could have done more good by staying home.

Sorting them out. They sound like they need sorting out.’

‘Ten million years of tradition is a heavy weight to shift,’ said the Doctor. ‘They’re so content with watching, occasionally messing around a little bit in other people’s affairs, and ignoring everything they could be doing…’

‘Everything you’re trying to do.’

‘It’s a long shopping list,’ admitted the Doctor.

Roz looked across at Leabie, deep in conversation with Walid.

‘I can’t help but wonder…’

‘What things might have been like if you’d stayed home?’

She nodded. ‘Something’s going on here. Leabie’s not telling me about it, but you can see the web of power forming and reforming… Doctor, there’s going to be war.’

‘And you think you could have prevented that.’

‘Possibly,’ said Roz. ‘On the other hand, maybe I’d be the one running it.’

‘You’ve accomplished a lot since leaving,’ said the Doctor.

‘First as an Adjudicator, then with me. None of that work would have been done if you’d stayed here and tried to –’

‘– shift the weight?’

He nodded.

‘We’re getting old, Doctor,’ said Roz, with a wry smile. She waved at a waiter. ‘Two extremely large and strong drinks, please.’

Midnight.

There was movement in the palace. More than the nocturnal activities of the servants, answering late-night calls, performing maintenance. Movement in the shadows where the lights were blinking off, one by one, and the cameras were dying.

A dozen murders happened in the space of ten minutes. The security systems quietly crashed. A servant brought an initial report to Leabie in her boardroom, where she was still in conversation with the Duke. Chris snored. The Doctor and Roz were sitting in his room, talking politics, when the lights suddenly went out.

220

Thandiwe screamed as the door to her bedroom shattered into pieces. A man stood in the doorway, peering inside with a weird bobbing movement of his head that made her think of the sims of vultures in her moving picture books. Her throat seemed to lock right up as the head swayed from side to side and then fixed in her direction.

The man came forward, his eyes locking on her. Thandiwe realized she couldn't make a sound. This was really happening.

A monster chewed through the roof of Somezi's bedroom and ripped him open before he even woke up.

Another smashed down the door of Leabie's boardroom.

'Again!' shouted Walid, pumping fifty rapid rounds from his personal plasma thrower into it.

Mantsebo tried to ward off the creature that had killed her bodyguard, snatching up the man's laser weapon, but her aim was wide.

Security responded within minutes to contain the threat. But within minutes, a dozen Forresters had died.

Ostensibly Thandiwe's Fat Monster Eater™ was the same mid-range cybernetic comforter – recommended ages one to four years – as twenty-three per cent of the Empire's human population had owned as children.

Essentially it was a big floppy sphere slightly over a metre in diameter covered in short dirt-resistant fur. Its mouth had been designed using the latest kinderpsyche profiling to be large dough to give small children just the right frisson of fear when it opened all the way without scaring them witless.

Inside, the Fat Monster Eater was filled with a foam comprising billions of tiny bubbles a few millimetres across, each one containing its own heating element, actuator and pinbrain.

The actuators moved the bubbles around in concert to create facial expressions and interesting and playful lumps on its body; the heating elements varied the temperature within the bubbles to allow the Fat Monster Eater to achieve buoyancy at average room temperature and float around a child's bedroom in an amusing fashion.

221

Right now the Fat Monster Eater was not amusing. Right now its big saggy mouth was wrapped around the head and shoulders of the monster that had come to kill Thandiwe.

She was screaming and screaming, a tiny, shrill sound, scrunched up on her bed while she hit the emergency button over and over.

The distorted creature was struggling for its life, one arm caught inside the Fat Monster Eater's maw, the other raking at its bulk with metallic claws. It turned from side to side, trying to shake the toy loose or smash it against a wall. But the Eater had no single brain, no organs to damage. It clung on to its victim like a factory-standard Fat Monster Eater oughtn't to, slowly sucking more and more of the creature's body inside its own.

Security had taken over a minute to respond, almost overwhelmed by the distorted creatures in the corridor outside.

They saw Thandiwe on her bed, still screaming. They saw the Fat Monster Eater engulf its victim to the knees, its body stretched as far as it would go, foam pouring from its wounds, its baggy shape slowly slackening.

Everyone around her had simply gone to pieces. Roz forced her feelings down into a tiny corner of her being and concentrated on what needed to be done.

There was nothing to do. Security was tight, the threat was over, there was a pile of monster corpses in the central compound. There was nothing to do but pick up the pieces, the pieces everyone had gone to. Stay cool, you're needed.

She stood in the boardroom, where the surviving heads of security had gathered. They'd already rounded up every member of staff with a psi rating – six were left alive – and sent them home. Rumour had it they'd been shot, but Roz had watched them board a shuttle, bewildered and terrified.

Roz shifted her position slightly. She was holding Leabie, who was weeping uncontrollably, babbling in !Xhosa and tearing at Roz's clothes.

Chris was in another room, bouncing Thandiwe on his knee, telling her silly jokes. No one had told her clearly what had happened yet, why her mummy was so upset or why a monster 222

had come into her room. She wanted another Fat Monster Eater.

Everyone promised her one. Chris had been pale as the proverbial ghost, somehow managing to smile at the little girl.

Gugwani had been completely out of control with grief and terror. Both of her bodyguards had been killed by a man with four arms ending in mouths. Reinforcements had arrived a moment before the biting started.

And the Doctor sat on the bench at the window of Leabie's boardroom, head propped up in his hand, staring out at the surface of the moon. Completely still. Ignoring anyone who spoke to him. Of all of them, he was the one who worried Roz the most.

Duke Walid was standing nearby, looking as though he was desperate for something to do, someone to shoot. His clothes were torn, his dark hair in disarray, and Leabie's personal physician was fussing over a deep gash in his arm. Security's counterstrike had almost been a few seconds late for him. He'd saved Leabie's life.

'Who's behind this?' said the Duke, bewildered. 'Who has the power to create these monsters out of innocent people?'

Roz looked at him pleadingly, and he walked up to her, taking Leabie from her grasp. *Thank you,* she mouthed.

'I'll see she's put to bed safely,' said the Duke. 'Come along, Leabie. There's nothing more we can do tonight.' He gestured to the physician, and they helped the devastated woman out of the room.

Roz watched her go. It was as though the grief had reduced her to nothing, just a wailing woman like anyone in a crowd, anyone in a news sim.

Roz sat down next to the Doctor. He didn't look at her. After a minute she realized he wasn't blinking, his eyes fixed on the landscape. She didn't know if he was even aware she was there.

It pissed her off. What the hell did he have to be shaken up about? He hadn't known Somezi and Mantsebo as babies. It wasn't his home the horror had invaded, his sister having hysterics in the next room.

223

She leant against the glass, closing her eyes for a moment, suddenly aware of how tired she was. She'd come home, and she'd brought the monsters with her.

'They were after me,' he said.

Roz's eyes snapped open. She'd almost fallen asleep. 'What?'

'They wanted me. Instead, they killed Leabie's children.'

'That can't be right,' said Roz. 'That doesn't make sense.'

'And what am I going to do about it?' said the Doctor. 'What am I going to do?'

'Nothing,' said Roz. 'You're wrong. This wasn't about you.

This was an attack on the family. No, you *are* going to do something.'

'What am I going to do?' said the Doctor.

'You're going to help me find out who was behind this.'

224

Meanwhile

Mont Blanc, Europe, 17 July 2982

Duke Geoffrey Armand looked up at the Alps. Naked of trees, naked of snow. Barren. Waiting for the time when the pines would once again march up the valleys and the winters would be soft and white.

Waiting the way he was waiting.

Armand was tall and handsome, very aristocratic-looking, dark-skinned and curly-haired, and it wasn't a bepple. He came from some of the best stock. The High Sheriff had come from his family for three generations.

He had walked five kilometres along the valley floor, beside a crisp and freezing stream. His estate was a ten-kilometre-wide strip of preserved land, although some of the mountains had needed repairs after a local war in 2547. It was a shame the water wasn't safe to drink. He sat down on a rock, wiping the sweat from his brow.

In the distance, his personal home was a vast structure, built into the side of a mountain. A beautiful wooden structure that looked out over the valley. The bulk of the house was inside the mountain, including the family archives and a survival unit that could handle a nuclear strike.

His harem were fighting again. He'd left the servants with strict instructions to prevent any physical violence, and walked out of the house, not even telling security where he was going.

225

You'd think they'd show him a little respect. He kept them in luxury – they could go wherever they liked, do whatever they wanted. They didn't even have to sleep with him. You'd think they'd listen when he shouted at them to shut up. Maybe they'd show him a little more respect. Soon. When his plans came to fruition.

His personal secretary would be in a complete flap by now; Armand had given him the slip. After an hour's walking, he was reasonably sure he wasn't being followed. There'd be a search party soon, though.

He got up again, stretching, noticing the ache in his thighs, just over each knee. He really ought to get more exercise.

'Greetings Duke Geoffrey Howard Armand of Europe, Lord High Sheriff of Earth,' said a dozen voices.

Armand looked around. There was a woman standing not ten feet away. She had delicate cheekbones and large, dark eyes, but he could see trained muscles under the sleeves of her white jacket. Her face was utterly blank.

‘I speak for the Brotherhood,’ said the woman. He could hear one voice – twelve voices – a hundred voices – echoes at the edge of his consciousness.

‘For the Grandmaster,’ he said.

‘Yes. I have been sent to inform you. The attack was partly successful but the objective was not achieved. Further plans are in progress.’

‘Not achieved!’ Armand stood up, poking his finger into the woman’s face. As he’d expected, she didn’t react. 'Not achieved!

Do you realize how much danger we’re in because you bungled that attack! I want full details sent to me immediately.’

‘That will be done when the situation becomes clear,’ said the woman.

‘We should attack,’ said Armand. ‘An outright attack while they’re at they’re weakest. The Council are in turmoil. Walid and Leabie are hurt even if they’re not dead. It’s time I did something positive.’

The woman held up a hand. ‘The war must remain in the shadows for now, Duke Geoffrey Armand of Europe.’

‘When do I get a say in this?’ said Armand. ‘When do all the promises come true? I’ve helped you from day one – when is it my turn?’

‘You are the channel through which our plans flow, just as I am the channel through which the leadership speaks. When you are Emperor you will speak for us.’

‘When I’m the Emperor,’ said Armand.

‘Yes.’

‘And when will that be? How close is it, now?’

‘Very close. There will be further information and instructions soon. Return to your house. Wait for our messages.’

Armand sighed. ‘All right. You know what you’re doing. All right.’

He turned to go back. ‘Wait a minute,’ he said. ‘What about –’

But she’d gone. He looked around. Teleportation? Telepathic

invisibility? ‘Ah, cruk it,’ he said.

He headed back for the house. The first thing he was going to do when he was the Emperor was get himself a new harem.

4

Europe

Kuleya had been watching them for half an hour. Either they hadn’t noticed her, or they were very, very good at not letting on they knew they were under surveillance. But then, a fourteen-year-old girl by herself, trying on hats, doesn’t look that strange or threatening. Which was, of course, the whole reason to give her the mission in the first place.

She’d picked up some bits and pieces from the two humans’

surface thoughts. The shopping trip was a deliberate attempt to attract attention. A desperate last bid, thought Kuleya. She hadn’t dared to probe further, in case she alerted them.

The three of them had gone to ground after the attack on Kibero. Some very serious searching had been done, but they’d been almost invisible for a month. Traces here and there suggested they were investigating the boss. Which was as it should be. But the fact they hadn’t taken any action suggested they weren’t getting very far with the search. Which was as it should be.

And then, one hour ago, Roz Forrester had used her newly created family credit account to buy a jacket.

Kuleya had started her search in the tailor’s, following the faint trace of memories through the crowds and shops, each brain softly being asked, *Have you seen these people?* It hadn’t taken long.

Now she had to decide between acting right away and waiting, making doubly sure they weren't aware of her presence. Of course, the longer she waited, the greater the chance of discovery.

Decisions, decisions.

'I'm keeping count, you know,' said Chris.

The Doctor picked up a dark-brown fedora. 'Hmm?'

'And this is the twenty-seventh shop we've been in.'

The Doctor popped the hat on his head. 'What do you think?'

'It doesn't go with what you're wearing,' Roz pointed out. She was sitting on a padded seat nearby, wearing a red and purple dress and a pair of sandals.

She was also wearing an enormous, wide-rimmed straw hat, festooned with bird-of-paradise feathers. The price tag hung down in front of her face. She flicked it away. 'And since you never wear anything else, you'd better buy something that matches.'

The Doctor stood in front of a full-length mirror, fingering the crumpled material of his clothes. 'I don't always wear the same thing,' he protested.

'What, you've had that jacket cloned?' said Roz.

'It's not the number of shops I mind,' said Chris. 'So much as the fact that neither of you ever buy anything.'

Roz waved a red and grey sleeve at him. 'What about this jacket?'

'I *like* this jacket,' protested the Doctor.

Roz put a finger to her lips. Chris looked around. A shop robot was meandering up to them, rolling on a single ball under its conical base. 'You want jackets?' it murmured.

'Hats,' said the Doctor.

'We got hats. What do you want?'

Chris sat down, sighing, as the Doctor and the robot got into a

complex argument about synthetic rabbit felt. At least he hadn't been stuck with carrying the shopping bags, since there weren't any.

He looked at the printed map of the galleria, feeling his heart sink. It took up more than a block of the overcity. There were 229

five hundred shops. More than a hundred of them were listed under *clothing, footwear and millinery*. 'I'm doomed,' he said.

'No,' Roz was explaining to another of the robots. 'What I want is genuine leather. Yes, these shoes are lovely, but I want actual tanned dead animal skin. Upstairs? Chris, can I borrow that map?'

He passed it over. 'I'm definitely doomed,' he said.

The Doctor wandered over as Roz was putting the outrageous feathered hat back. 'And a good thing too,' he said. 'That's far more Benny's style than yours. Would you believe that robot had never even heard of Jimmy Stewart?'

'Do you think we're attracting enough attention?'

'Why don't you buy that hat?' said the Doctor.

'Where now?'

'Imports, apparently,' said Roz. 'The only way to get genuine leather shoes is to have them sent over from the Crow Nation.'

'Bison leather?' said the Doctor.

'Apparently.'

'Here we go again,' said Chris, trailing after them.

Groenewegen's department store filled twenty floors of the galleria, crammed with merchandise, music, mirrors. On floor seventeen there was a beautiful vase, not an antique, but a new work of art.

They took the escalators up from the headwear department on floor six, passing through scents and bathroom accessories. Roz identified the smells almost subconsciously as they rode those moving stairs. Sandalwood, rose, lavender, smoke, peppermint, frangipani.

It was like being inside a HeadStop sim. So much sensory input you won't be able to think, they promised. Guaranteed to shock that monkeymind. Your head will stop or your money back.

She could picture the vase, made from electrically fired silicon, some new technique from the colonies. Swirls of hot blue colour trapped in glass so clear it was almost invisible.

Up through music, sabasaba clashing with the Hithles. Roz had tried a few of those HeadStops after Martle had died. After she'd killed Martle. She'd tried a lot of things in those heavy days 230

before she'd found Doc Dantalion and his memory-cutting knife.

Anything to replace the worn, jumping and stuttering sim of the moment she'd thrown that vibroknife, puncturing his eye, his skull, his miserable crooked life.

The vase, in a hundred pieces, like an eggshell. She could see it so clearly, now, riding up and up towards the roof, where the light would break in, letting the light in, cutting through her skin to let the light in, like having her excised memory forced back in by Dantalion, smiling an insect smile.

She couldn't move. She couldn't breathe. She could breathe, but only through one nostril. She needed to open her mouth. She wanted to use her hands to pry her mouth open so she could get a decent breath, but she couldn't move.

She could move, rolling over, blood pouring down her face.

Her head was surrounded by pieces of glass, blue and clear.

'Here,' said the Doctor. He handed her a clean hanky.

'Shit!' she said, catapulting off the floor and feeling her neck, her head still full of the image of cutting, slicing through the tough walls of the vein and artery in her throat.

'It's all right,' said the Doctor. He was quivering with energy, pale as a ghost. 'Chris! Look for someone with a matching nosebleed.'

'I'm on it,' said the boy. 'I see her!' He pushed through the crowd.

Roz looked at the vase. 'Don't worry about it,' the Doctor said.

'It'll go on my credit card. Chris will be pleased.'

'What?'

'We bought something.'

Chris pushed through the crowd, using size and determination to get people out of his way. He broke free of the circle of onlookers.

There! The girl he'd spotted, fighting her way through the crowd with panicked movements knocking people and shopping bags flying. Chris thundered after her, shouting 'Stop thief! Stop thief!'

The girl glanced back – she was so young, no more than sixteen! – and hurled herself down a narrow passageway. Chris 231

passed a VIEWING AREA sign as he followed her, stumbling over a cleaning robot.

The girl ran smack into a crowd of tourists, standing about in a cool blue lounge, staring out at the overcity. She looked back once more. Chris saw a flash of dark eyes, desperately afraid.

'No!' he shouted.

The girl hurled herself at one of the great rectangular windows.

She bounced off the hyperglass, flung backward into a row of chairs. They scattered in all directions as the girl tumbled down.

Chris was running up when someone else grabbed her. The girl kicked and screamed, but couldn't get loose.

It was Iaomnet. She looked at Chris. He looked at her.

'Oh no!' they both shouted. 'Not you again!'

An extremely nervous truce found them sitting in Iaomnet's rented apt half an hour later, the would-be assassin still unconscious after the double-eye had pressed a Sleepybye derm against her neck.

It was a low-level, grungy room. The Doctor had sent Chris to the level's common room to filch enough chairs for all of them.

'You were following us,' said Roz.

Iaomnet shook her head. 'I'm off your case. I was following her. Suspected Brotherhood operative.'

'You know about them?' said Chris, surprised.

'Of course. Not much, but we know they're there.'

The assassin was asleep on the narrow bed. A thin girl, perhaps fourteen or fifteen years old, with pale skin and tightly curly hair.

Iaomnet tilted back her head, pinched her eye open, and used a retinal scanner. ‘Right,’ she said. ‘I’m going to run this through records. It’ll take a few minutes.’

‘Wake her up,’ said the Doctor.

‘You don’t want to give her a second chance.’

‘No,’ said the Doctor. ‘This won’t work if she’s unconscious.’

He took something out of his jacket pocket. It was an insect –

no, Iaomnet saw, it was a bot in the shape of an insect. Like a moth. ‘What is it?’ she said.

‘A shutterfly.’

‘You didn’t get that at Groenewegen’s,’ said Roz.

‘No. I appropriated it from a couple of JayJaxians who were trying to extract a psi embryo from me.’

‘Huh?’ said Chris. ‘When did that happen?’

‘Oh, ages ago,’ said the Doctor. ‘It’s a long story. I thought I’d better keep it handy. The JayJaxians use it for interrogating telepaths.’

‘I’d prefer a standard interrogation,’ said Iaomnet.

‘I’m sure she would, as well,’ said the Doctor. ‘Wake her up.’

Iaomnet screwed up her mouth, thinking about it. ‘Give it a try,’ she said. ‘But she’s my collar, all right?’

‘She doesn’t go with what you’re wearing,’ said the Doctor, as Iaomnet pressed another derm against the girl’s neck.

The assassin blinked, shaking all over. The shutterfly lifted from the Doctor’s hand, electric wings sparkling as it came to life.

It settled on his forehead for a moment. He closed his eyes, folding his hands in his lap, and suddenly relaxed, so completely and utterly that

he almost fell out of the chair.

The shutterfly lifted back into the air. The assassin was just coming around, sitting up, trying to get her bearings. Iaomnet drew her stunner. The instant she got her act together, she'd be dangerous again.

The shutterfly jumped on to the girl's face. She shouted with surprise and flapped her hands at the thing, trying to knock it off.

It crawled around the back of her head as she snatched at its wings.

She went stiff, suddenly, and fell sideways on the bed. Iaomnet craned her neck. The shutterfly was settling down on the back of the girl's neck, its glittering wings folding.

She had a horrible, sudden vision of the thing pushing one of those tube-tongues into the girl's brain.

Kuleya found herself in some kind of house. A very old-fashioned house, all wood and rugs and staircases. It reminded her of the boss's house –

Don't think about that!

'You catch on quickly,' said someone.

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She spun. It was the Doctor. She hurled the biggest *orchestra strike* at him she could manage.

He caught it with some alien technique she didn't recognize, the blast of sound swirling around him like lightning and earthing into the carpet.

'This could easily become tediously lengthy and symbolic,' he said, 'so let's not mess about.'

Kuleya had had training to deal with this sort of thing. She thought hard of the desert, the place where she'd grown up, the water reclamation plant where her father had worked.

'Tch, tch, tch,' said the Doctor. 'You don't define the environment. I do.' He walked towards her.

'Stay away from me!' said Kuleya. She didn't like the pitch of her

voice. ‘I’m just a kid, you leave me alone!’

‘Just a kid,’ said the Doctor, ‘fourteen years old, sold to the Brotherhood…’ He tipped his head to one side. ‘When you were seven. You manifested psi powers early. Or did they track you down through a genetic database, and pick you up before you even began to read minds?’

Kuleya screamed and ran up the stairs.

‘Got her,’ said Iaomnet, looking at her DataStream. She paused. ‘Got her twice.’

‘With a retina pattern?’ said Chris.

‘Zanape Kuleya,’ said Iaomnet. ‘Deceased. Died seven years ago, at the age of seven, in an industrial accident. And Tsitsi Kuleya, indentured colonist.’

‘Identical twins?’ said Chris.

‘No. Not with a retina pattern. Guess who Ms Kuleya is indentured to.’

The Doctor strolled through the corridor. ‘I don’t plan to spend long here,’ he called out. ‘It’ll be faster if you show me the door I want.’

He wrenched open a door. Inside, a young girl with light-brown skin was playing with a doll, on the barren floor of a standard worker’s apt. He shut the door and pulled open another.

234

Inside, the same girl, older, was crying while her father talked to a man she didn’t know who had come to take her away.

Kuleya was standing next to him, looking into her memory.

‘How can you do this so easily?’ she said. ‘I’ve tried *warding*, I’ve tried *backoff*, and I can’t stop you accessing my memories.’

‘You’re young and inexperienced,’ said the Doctor, ‘and you weren’t completely trained, were you?’ He closed the door. ‘I think the word I’m looking for is *expendable*.’

‘Get *out* of here,’ said Kuleya.

‘To tell you the truth, the reason I’m interrogating you now is that I

don't expect you to survive long enough to be interrogated by the good Ms Wszola.'

Kuleya bit her lip to stop herself from crying. 'They wouldn't do that. They've looked after me, half of my life.'

'Come on,' said the Doctor. 'We both know that once you were captured, you put the conspiracy into terrible danger. You'll have to be killed before they can find out anything from you.'

'I've been trained to resist the mindprobe,' said Kuleya.

'That's for ordinary citizens,' said the Doctor. 'I imagine you'll shortly be a guest of the Imperial Intelligence's psi division. Or at least, they'll be the ones who claim your corpse.' He strolled down the corridor, knocking on each of the doors as he passed. 'I expect they'll try to use induction to pick up memories in your brain. They'll have to be quick, though.'

One of the doors knocked back.

The Doctor hesitated. He looked back at Kuleya. She hated him, hard, but it didn't kill him.

He opened the door.

Inside, she was talking to Duke Geoffrey Armand, Lord High Sheriff of Earth.

'Armand,' said Roz.

Chris shook his head. 'I still say he's too obvious. Especially since he's Walid's main competition for the throne.'

'Assuming it is Armand,' said Roz, 'and may I remind you you're going to owe me ten credits if it is, what are we going to do? We can't just march up and arrest a duke.'

'One law for the rich,' said the Doctor.

'In any case,' said Iaomnet, tucking away her DataStream, 'this is a matter for Imperial security, not two renegade Adjudicators and an alien with no official standing.'

'And we can't expose him,' Roz went on, ignoring her. 'The political

situation is delicate enough as it is.'

'Look,' said Chris.

The shutterfly lifted from the sleeping girl's neck. It stretched and flapped its jewelled wings and landed once more on the Doctor's forehead. He blinked, raised a hand, and the mechanical insect alighted on his fingers.

'Armand,' he said.

'Look,' said Iaomnet. 'Do you mind?'

'OK, Doctor,' said Chris. 'What's the plan?'

'Oh, rhubarb to the plan,' said the Time Lord. 'Let's just ask him.'

Iaomnet said, 'What?'

Roz rolled her eyes. 'How did I know you were going to say that?'

The Duke Armand was sitting around in one of his parlours. It had been decorated in a heavily ornamental ancient French style.

The name of the period escaped the Lord High Sheriff, who was sitting at an antique writing desk with his boots up on the blotter, dreaming of the Empire.

The Council – what was left of it – had voted to crown Duke Walid the Emperor. Surprising no one. He hadn't heard from the Brotherhood since that bit of news had appeared on Centcomp, but they'd warned him that Walid might spend some time on the throne before their plans came to fruition.

Still, it was galling. Walid must be sitting in his palace on Callisto, smirking. Let him smirk, Armand told himself over and over. Smirk smirk smirk. There'd be nothing for it after the coup than to kill Walid and much of his house, eliminating the legal threat to Armand's succession.

Once it was all sorted out, thought Armand, he was going to have a sim made about it. With a suitably aristocratic-looking actor in his role. Perhaps –

A servant knocked quietly on the door. Armand looked up.

‘Your Excellency,’ said the servant, ‘a visitor requests an urgent audience.’

‘Don’t they have a card to present? Who is it, then?’

‘Your Excellency, he says his name is Emil Zatopek, and that you would know who he was.’

Armand took his feet off the desk.

‘This should be interesting. Take him to the drawing room with the best view. And bring us coffee and condensed milk, and some fruit tarts.’

‘Very good, Your Excellency.’

The little man was waiting for him in the drawing room, looking out at the Alps with his hands clasped behind his back.

‘Are you well?’ said the Duke, taking a chair. This room had modern furnishings among the antique curtains and paintings.

‘I’ve been receiving your messages for some time. I’m glad to see you made it here safely.’

Zatopek turned. Armand could believe this was a telepath, cool blue eyes moving over him. He had an urge to finger the dampening bug he wore behind his ear, a sliver of technology which was supposed to protect him from psychic intrusion. Best not to give it away, even if Zatopek was supposedly only a psychokinetic.

‘Thank you,’ said Zatopek. ‘Our enemies have been close behind me ever since I escaped them. But I’m sure I’m safe now I’m here.’

‘Has there been any word from the Brotherhood?’

Zatopek shook his head. ‘Be patient, Your Excellency. Every kind of wheel is in motion.’

‘You warned me about your disguise,’ said Armand, ‘but this is a transformation. You’re a different man to the one I met in Zanzibar.’ He looked at Zatopek, considering. ‘Is it some kind of telepathic illusion, perhaps?’

‘I don’t understand it myself,’ said Zatopek. He sank into a chair, a servant proffering a tray with coffee. He took a cup, spooning condensed milk into the strong stuff. 'Not fully. It’s as though someone

else's existence has simply been imprinted over mine. It took a long time to regain control of myself. I'm not sure 237

even the Brotherhood is prepared to deal with technology that powerful.'

'And the enemy?' said Armand. 'You've told me little about them.'

'Oh,' said Zatopek, 'They're too busy looking for me to worry about what's really going on.'

'Yes,' persisted Armand, 'but who are they? You said the Brotherhood had encountered this Doctor before.'

'They have,' he replied. 'Many times throughout our long history.'

'How is that possible?'

'Because compared to the Doctor,' said Zatopek, 'the Brotherhood are a bunch of half-witted, incompetent meddlers who ought to know better than to cook up vast schemes to conquer the universe.'

Armand stared at him. Zatopek picked up a fruit tart from the tray. 'Well, it's true,' said the psychokinetic. 'They're not even holding up their end of the deal, are they? Are you the Emperor yet?'

'When we first met,' said Armand, 'you were full of praise for the Brotherhood. All the things they'd accomplished, their secret positions of power and influence. You sold them to me, Emil.'

'It wasn't hard,' said Zatopek. 'You wanted to be Emperor so much your teeth hurt. Didn't you?'

'You know,' said Duke Armand, 'I've never been to Zanzibar.'

'I have,' said his guest. 'I was there when Vasco da Gama sailed into the harbour in 1499.'

'I knew it was you, Doctor,' said Armand. He drained the last of his coffee. 'Even before you made that little slip.'

'Did I omit a coded greeting?' said the Doctor. 'Does the real Zatopek hate coffee?'

'No,' said a voice from the doorway. Armand watched as the Doctor looked up, raising an eyebrow.

‘Hello again, Emil,’ he said.

Emil Zatopek walked into the room, slowly. He was supported by one of Armand’s nursing staff, a woman in a stiff white 238

uniform. She helped him into a chair, and stood behind it, managing not to stare at the Doctor.

Armand looked between them. At first glance, you might not realize they were identical. Zatopek wore a loose-fitting, dark-red suit, stylish in comparison with the Doctor’s battered tweed.

But it was much more than that. Zatopek had aged. His hair was rich with grey, his face heavy with wrinkles. The irises of his eyes were flecked with white, and his hands shook as they held the arms of his chair.

‘I’ve been waiting for you,’ said Zatopek. ‘I knew you’d be drawn here to me.’

‘You were wrong,’ said the Doctor.

‘Look at me!’ insisted the psychokinetic. ‘You must feel a connection with me. When the Nexus exploded, your timeline shattered. Every possibility of your life, past and present, exploding outwards in your own personal Big Bang.’

The Doctor glanced at Armand. The Duke felt as though he was being measured, evaluated – could he understand this bizarre talk? He sat forward in his chair, listening intently.

‘And I caught one of them,’ Zatopek went on. ‘I didn’t want to.

I felt that possibility reach out and grab at me, desperate to become real. Wrapping itself around me. Suffocating me.’

‘You’re dying,’ said the Doctor. ‘You’re dying because you fought your way free of it.’

Zatopek nodded. ‘This possibility is dying, its probability falling back to zero, its time burning up.’ His cloudy eyes were fixed on the Doctor. ‘Can you get this thing off me? Can you tear this shroud away?’

The Doctor shook his head.

‘Do you want to know how he was different to you?’

‘No,’ said the Doctor.

Zatopek grinned, a crooked, insane grin, out of place on the Doctor’s face. ‘That’s good,’ he said. ‘Because I’m not going to tell you.’

Armand said, ‘So he can’t help you?’

Zatopek glared at the Duke, as though he was a child who’d spoken out of turn. ‘He can’t help me,’ he said.

‘Then I’ll have him killed. That’ll be one less problem.’

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‘Sit still, Geoffrey,’ said Zatopek.

The Duke stared at him.

‘He can’t help either of us. He’s not our enemy any more.

We’ve both been betrayed.’ Zatopek’s voice quivered with rage.

‘I gave them the key to ultimate power, and they left me here to die.’

‘No,’ said Armand.

‘They’ve forgotten about you, Duke,’ snapped Zatopek.

‘Walid’s coronation was never part of the plan. At least, not the original plan.’

Armand got up. ‘If they want a war,’ he said, and realized he was shouting, and damn it, he had reason to shout, ‘they’ll have one, by God!’

The Doctor said, ‘Are you quite ready to go up against Walid’s army?’

‘I will be,’ said Armand. ‘I’ll build up the largest army this solar system has ever seen. I’ll tear the throne out of the House Walid.’

‘I don’t think you’ll have time,’ said the Doctor. ‘History’s moving too fast for you, Lord High Sheriff. The Brotherhood kept you quiet with promises of power, and now it’s too late for you to act. Besides, I’ve only just beaten Imperial Intelligence to your door.’

Armand slumped back into his chair. The Doctor got up, looking out at the Alps again. ‘Perhaps,’ he said, ‘it’s too late for all of us.’

It took Zatopek two weeks to die.

The Doctor sent Chris and Roz home to Kibero. Double-eye cleaned out Armand's palace, checking every computer and physical record, interrogating his harem and servants. They left Zatopek where he was, on the Doctor's advice that moving him would probably kill him. Iaomnet spent a fruitless afternoon trying to get him to talk.

The Doctor stayed with him the whole time, dozing by his bed and bossing the nursing staff around. Zatopek was often delirious in the last few days.

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Once or twice he fixed the Doctor with his nearly blind eyes.

The Time Lord had been reading the first time.

'Kuleya will be dead by now,' said Zatopek.

The Doctor looked up from *Vurt*. 'I told Iaomnet to give her high-security protection,' he said.

'They'll have installed *immolate* into her subconscious,' said Zatopek. 'It'll activate the instant someone tries to interrogate her telepathically. They'd better be standing a little distance away.'

The Doctor silently thanked the shutterfly's designers. 'A cruel thing to do to a child.'

'A tiny price to pay for liberation,' said Zatopek. 'The liberation of an entire species, Doctor. How many lives is that worth?' He fell asleep again.

Sometimes the Doctor tried to guess what had gone differently in this alternative Doctor's life. Had he decided against destroying Skaro, leaving billions to be killed or enslaved by the Daleks? Had he found a way to stop Kopyion destroying the Seven Planets? Or had he just had cornflakes instead of scrambled eggs for breakfast one morning?

The next time Zatopek woke, he said, 'No more silence, Doctor. Imagine it. We are the real human beings. It's our responsibility, you see. Our responsibility to bring them across.'

'You thought Aulis Crater would contain the answer, didn't you?' said the Doctor. 'You thought that whatever was there would make your

dream come true.'

Zatopek nodded. 'We detected its psychic leakage. I believed it to be some kind of massive psi generator. We didn't realize it was something even more powerful, more precious.'

'You said you gave them – the Brotherhood? – the key to ultimate power. What did you tell them?' Zatopek just looked away.

The Doctor said, 'Armand was just a cover, wasn't he?'

'Yes. Of course. They never had any intention of making him Emperor, any more than they intended to help me. The Duke was just something to keep the double-eyes occupied while we attended to the real work.'

'And what is the real work, Emil?'

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He just smiled, a nasty, fading smile. 'You will find out, Doctor,' he said. 'You will find them, I have complete confidence in you. Hopefully it will result in your mutual destruction.'

Five hours later, he died.

He never did tell the Doctor which alternative he was.

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Interlude

1 September 2982

The Doctor opened his eyes. The first thing he saw was a clock.

Two hours since Roz's funeral. It would all be over by now.

Someone in a white medic's uniform was standing over him, holding a handscan. He pushed the man's hand away. 'Please,' he said. 'I just need to rest. Please.'

His eyes closed of their own accord. Dimly he heard Chris telling the medic, 'Take his word for it.' There was a muttered conversation, drowned out by the sudden *clenching* of his left heart like a fist around a broken glass, the red rushing noise in his ears.

He opened his eyes again. The clock had jumped forward a quarter of an hour. The wall of the medical shuttle curved up and over to his right; a plastic curtain hid the rest of the vehicle to his left. They'd left him alone, covered with a thin blanket, a scattering of cool electrodes across his chest.

His right shoulder ached, inexplicably. He closed his eyes again.

His left heart *clenched*. He felt the sweat start out of his forehead. His body was still trying to heal the damage done by the heart attack, nanites racing to tear up the dead tissue, build fresh muscle in its place. Struggling to hold back death.

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Clench. He felt the weight on his chest, pinning him down. He opened his eyes.

The cobra was five foot long and impossibly heavy. He had never seen one this close before. He found himself admiring the detail of its face, each of the scales lovingly hand-crafted into a sleek, black, close-fitting garment, the lidless eyes behind the protecting spectacle, never closing, always watching. Green eyes, watching.

For a moment he wondered if the shuttle door had been left open – one of the pets from Leabie's garden had escaped into the cool interior of the ship. For a moment he thought that someone else would come in and lift the weight of the snake off his chest.

But only for a moment.

'Ah,' he said, 'the Eternal Verity.'

The snake shifted her position. His heart *clenched* in protest, making

him struggle for breath.

‘All right,’ he gasped. ‘You win. I give up.’

‘This isn’t a game,’ said the snake.

‘The race, then. The hare loses to the turtle. Don’t you understand? You win.’

Her tongue lapped the air near his face. ‘It’s our bargain.’

‘Then I’m ending it,’ he said. ‘Enough. I won’t fight any more.

Do what you want. Death. Regeneration. I don’t care.’

‘Not this time.’

‘What do you mean? Not this time?’

‘You haven’t learnt your lesson.’ She slithered forward, her tongue flickering near his ear. ‘Without warning,’ she hissed.

‘Without purpose. Alone and afraid.’

‘I know all about that,’ he said. ‘This situation meets those criteria, wouldn’t you say?’ He shut his eyes. ‘Quickly. Before they come back in and that medic starts doing goodness knows what with his Feinbergers.’

The snake chuckled, sliding down along his right shoulder on to the bed. ‘You haven’t learnt anything,’ she said.

He tried to move, to bring her back to him before she could seek out another of his friends. But his heart stuttered and *clenched* again, and he found himself sliding, sliding down into the dark.

244

Later, when he was sitting up in the shuttle’s personnel section, trying to drink tea from a plastic cup while the medic fussed over him, Chris said, ‘I didn’t want to mention this earlier, but we left the shuttle door open and the biggest snake I’ve ever seen got inside. It was OK, though: we threw it out before it could do any harm.’

The Doctor just looked at him. ‘Spitting cobra,’ said the medic.

‘You said it,’ said the Doctor.

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Part Three

Valhalla

246

1

Callistro

25 August 2982

The Doctor wandered Leabie's palace. It was silent and dark.

That was partly because it was the middle of the night. But even in the artificial daytime, it had still seemed silent and dark.

Missing something essential.

There was a lot of wandering to be done here. It was as though the palace had been made for explorers. The Doctor had a map, but he didn't bother to look at it, just producing it when one of the population of security officers asked for his ID.

He came across Chris, floating on an inflated raft in a vast swimming pool. In the darkened room, the ceiling was covered in white ripples reflected from the water. There was no tang of chlorine in the air – nanomachines gobbled up the algae like microscopic piranha.

The Doctor sat on a deckchair, waiting until Chris's raft drifted up to the edge of the pool. The bump woke Chris up. He blinked up at the Doctor. 'I think I dropped my magazine in the pool,' he said.

'Here you are, sir,' said the life-saver bot. The spindly android

crouched down by the side of the pool and handed Chris the magazine, which it had carefully dried and pressed before reading several of the more interesting articles.

247

The Doctor watched the android climb back into its high chair, looking over the pool.

‘Oooooh,’ groaned Chris. ‘I have never eaten so much in my entire life.’

‘I gather the coronation party is still going on,’ said the Doctor.

Chris looked at his chronometer. ‘But it’s been three days,’ he said.

‘The previous Empress’s coronation feast went on for two and a half weeks,’ said the Doctor.

‘Citizens will make merry on pain of death?’ said Chris.

‘Something like that.’

‘Roz has been watching the news,’ said Chris. ‘You won’t believe the job offer she’s got.’

‘Is she still in the newsroom?’

‘I think so.’ Chris put the magazine over his face. ‘I am not moving for at least twenty-four hours.’

The Doctor found his way to the newsroom. Roz was still there, watching a vast bank of screens. The Doctor counted thirty-eight of them, all set to news channels, from TopTenPercent to the Jovian Intranets.

‘Hey,’ said Roz. ‘Pull up a chair.’ She was sitting with her feet on a cleaning robot, which was humming to itself with annoyance, flakes of ash just out of its reach. She was smoking, the packet of Yemayan Strikes propped up on a keyboard.

The Doctor sat down. Half the screens were showing footage of the coronation ceremony. One or two were showing the previous coronation, almost a century and a half ago. Helen Kristiansen, grey-haired and dignified and relatively sane, making the only career move up from President of Earth.

‘How is Leabie taking it?’ the Doctor said.

Roz glanced at him. ‘She’s in a marvellous position. Close business ties and a real personal friendship with the Emperor. It’s a good time for the House Forrester.’

Walid’s ceremony had been on a considerably smaller scale than his predecessor’s. There hadn’t even been any executions.

Just endless processions through the gardens of Callisto, special G roadways laid down to prevent the participants from floating 248

away. The plants stretched high and delicate in the tiny gravity, trees like clouds and roses like needles.

Every noble had been there. The Doctor had lost count of the counts. There had been marquesses and viscounts. There had been barons who reigned over just ten storeys of an overcity block and dukes who owned planets. There had been alien dignitaries, invited as guests this time, not the beaten and frightened leaders and warriors dragged along behind Helen I.

Walid had even made a point of speaking to them personally.

Even the Lord High Sheriff of Earth had been there, managing to look simultaneously sorry for himself and relieved that his head hadn’t been lopped off. They could do Armand for conspiracy, supposed the Doctor, but the truth was he’d got nothing out of the Brotherhood but promises. It might be better for the Empire’s stability to pretend it hadn’t happened.

What were they up to? Why had they withdrawn their allegiance? They were patient. Appallingly patient, patient the way a tiny crack in a glacier is patient. They would let a plan brew for a century.

‘Where are they?’ he said aloud. ‘What are they doing now?’

‘The Brotherhood?’ said Roz. ‘They saw which way the wind was blowing, dropped Armand like a hot rock, and went back underground waiting for their next big chance.’

‘Or is that just what we’re supposed to think?’ wondered the Doctor.

Roz looked at him. ‘You never can tell with these devious bastards.’

The Doctor turned his attention back to the screens. One showed

Leabie in a cheerful interview. There were rumours of concubinage, which she laughed off. ‘We’re just good friends.

I’m delighted to be in a position to support the House Walid. The coronation is the best possible news for the Empire.’

‘She’s right, you know,’ said Roz, turning the volume down again. ‘Peace has broken out everywhere. Everyone’s certain again.’

‘That, and a massive ISN redeployment to a dozen colony worlds. Walid making a show of strength. No more monsters?

N-forms or altered humans?’

‘Nope. The Empire’s calm. Even the resistance are quiet: they’re probably trying to decide what they think of the new boy.’

‘So the crisis is past. Everything’s settling into place.’

‘Looks like it.’

‘And what about you?’

Roz lit up another cigarette. The Doctor waved the smoke away. ‘The Emperor’s personal secretary has offered me the position of Pontifex Saecularis. Head of the Order of Adjudicators.’

The Doctor looked at her, one of his slow, considering looks.

‘Are you going to accept?’ he said at last.

‘I already have,’ she said.

He reached out and shook her hand, solemnly.

‘Congratulations. There’s a happy ending,’ he said.

‘The position ranks just below the Emperor in importance,’

said Roz. ‘I’d be in a position to shape history. Get some justice out there, clean up this corrupt dump of an Empire. Starting with the Order of Adjudicators, which is filthy to the core. I’d start by ferreting out the conspirators who murdered my nephew and niece. Purge the Brotherhood’s infiltrators. If Chris wants to stay, I could appoint him Lord High Sheriff, set his family up with a nice little moon of their

own.'

She took a drag, puffed out a cloud of smoke. 'It also gives the Emperor a way of keeping an eye on the House of Forrester. An additional tie with Leabie can't hurt. Keep her on side.' She sighed. 'I'd really like to believe that it really is all over. I really don't want to hear any more bad news.'

'I don't have any,' said the Doctor.

'You'll find some.' Roz sighed.

'Mmm. This peace is too quick. I don't trust it.'

'The Council doesn't reconvene for a week. That's when the real work of restabilizing the government and the Empire will begin.'

'So history is still in disequilibrium.' He waved a hand at the screens. 'One push, in the right place…'

'I'm not worried about little pushes,' said Roz. 'It's hulking great battleships zooming about and blowing planets up that I'm 250

worried about.' She ground out the cigarette on the console.

'Why'd you kill the Empress?'

'Is that an official question?' said the Doctor.

Roz smiled a little. 'I'm not going to be invested for a month.'

'She asked me to,' he said.

'Yeah,' she said, 'but you were expecting that, right? You went in there with the intention of giving history one almighty shove.'

The Doctor shook his head. Roz lifted an eyebrow, but she believed him. He didn't lie to her very often.

'She would have found some way of dying,' said the Doctor.

'But she might have spent another ten years looking for it. Or she might have really been assassinated, and the Empire would be at war right now…'

'All the possibilities,' said Roz. 'As usual, we drop in, and history coalesces around us.'

‘I don’t think you should take that position.’

‘You don’t agree?’

‘I mean the Pontifex Saecularis position.’

‘Doctor,’ said Roz. ‘I’m flattered. But I can’t stay aboard the TARDIS for ever.’

He was shaking his head. ‘You ought to stay well clear of history. Especially now.’

‘A while back, you said my life had more possibilities than Chris’s life. What did you mean by that?’

‘I mean, when you see history coming,’ he said, ‘duck.’

‘Leabie was looking for you,’ said Roz. ‘Didn’t your beeper go off?’

The Doctor pulled the map out of his pocket. ‘I wondered what that was. I switched it off.’

‘She’s up in the observatory. It sounded important, you’d better go and see her right away.’

The Doctor got up. ‘Movement at last,’ he said.

‘Quack,’ said Roz.

Leabie was watching the stars, sitting in a reclined, padded seat, one hand on the controls of the observatory. The whole room spun slowly at her touch.

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The Doctor stood on the curved floor of the great observatory.

It was a translucent ball, ten metres across, able to tilt up to forty-five degrees in any direction.

Leabie moved the controls until Callisto was directly overhead.

Tiny points of light were visible, ships to-ing and fro-ing from the Empire’s new seat of power.

‘Isn’t it marvellous about Roz?’ she said.

‘Indeed,’ said the Doctor. ‘It’s quite a comeback, from renegade to top of the totem pole.’

‘I wanted to thank you for looking after her,’ said Leabie. ‘For rescuing her from the Adjudicators in the first place. For bringing her back intact.’

‘My pleasure,’ he said. ‘Though Roz does most of the looking after herself. Your sister is a remarkable woman, Lady Forrester.’

‘That she is,’ said Leabie. ‘Doctor, there’s another reason I asked you to see me – the Emperor has requested your presence,’

she said.

‘Ah,’ said the Doctor.

‘He says he needs to clear up some matters relating to the killing of Helen the First. He’s been crowned, so the circumstances of her death don’t affect his claim to the throne.’

Leabie sat up and looked at him. ‘I’m sure he wants to have a proper talk with you about it. After all, he doesn’t want to end up the way she did. It sounds ghastly.’

‘Did he ask me to go alone?’

‘He didn’t make any specific instructions. But I’m sure you could bring servants, secretaries. I’ll provide whoever you want.

And a shuttle, of course. He’s expecting you at eleven hundred IST. That’s in about two hours.’

‘Thank you, Lady Leabie,’ said the Doctor. ‘I’ll leave within the hour.’

‘Give His Majesty my best wishes. I’ll be seeing him in two days for the planning conference, of course.’

‘Don’t go,’ said Roz.

They were sitting around in Chris’s room. The Doctor looked over to Chris, who was surrounded by a tailor, taking 252

measurements. ‘You don’t have to come with me,’ he told the young man for the third time.

‘Neither of you should go,’ said Roz. ‘I don’t like this at all.’

‘It’s the *Emperor*, Roz,’ said Chris. The tailor tutted, trying to measure his chest. ‘We can’t *not* go.’

Roz put her hands on her hips. ‘I can’t let you boys out of my sight for a moment without you getting into trouble.’

‘Relax, Roz,’ said the Doctor. ‘If there is something afoot, Walid’s hardly going to draw attention to his connection by letting it happen in his palace.’

Roz said, ‘You mean, if he’d insisted on seeing you alone on some godforsaken asteroid, you wouldn’t go? But when he invites you to his palace, the centre of his power, where there are ninety-five billion guards, you don’t feel worried?’

‘Of course I’m worried,’ said the Doctor. ‘Appallingly worried.

I just don’t think Walid’s ready to act yet. He’s only just been crowned; he has yet to consolidate his power.’

‘Do you really think Walid is up to something?’ said Chris. ‘I thought Armand was the guy behind the conspiracy. Maybe we’re just being paranoid.’

‘That’s what I’m hoping to find out,’ said the Doctor.

The Doctor and his servant arrived at Callisto late in the moon’s morning, in one of Leabie’s personal yachts, the *Model Citizen*. Genevieve was waiting for them at the edge of the landing site. She was wearing mock chainmail and her ceremonial sword, and some probably very unauthentic but very gorgeous knightly clothes. Her yellow hair was tied up in a pair of elaborate pigtails, held by a lattice.

They walked from the yacht to where the grass began, half a kilometre from the palace itself. The Doctor’s shirt had actually been ironed, and he wore a matching Paisley waistcoat and tie.

He raised his hat. ‘My Lady.’

Poor Mr Cwej looked terrified, a smile fixed to his face. He was dressed in the uniform of one of Leabie’s staff, a tasteful black suit with the red stone of the House Forrester emblazoned over his left shoulder.

She took Mr Cwej's hands. 'Welcome, both of you,' she said.

'The Duke has asked me to look after you until he can break free of the latest of these interminable meetings.'

The Doctor smiled and set off across the grass. Mr Cwej was staring up at the palace. It was a massive, inverted cone, more cones shooting up from its black, glassy surface, like a vast, sparkling artificial mountain. 'Intimidating, isn't it?' she murmured, as she led him towards the entrance.

'Yeah, I mean yes,' he said. 'A bit.'

'I was petrified the first time I came here,' she said. 'I just about got back into my Hopper and went home. I felt like if I put a foot wrong, the whole building would fall down on me and squash me flat.'

Chris's smile relaxed into a real one. 'The Doctor's so good at just talking to kings and dukes and people. I'm much better at alien monsters.'

'Don't you worry,' said Genevieve. 'Everyone's nervous around the Emperor, even the dukes and duchesses. Part of my job is making sure every guest feels comfortable. Even the servants, and by the way, that uniform looks marvellous on you.'

'I decided not to go back to the Adjudicators,' said Chris.

'After all these adventures, I need a rest. Leabie offered me a job as her personal pilot.'

'That's marvellous,' she said. 'Oh, the Doctor's got away…'

'We'd better catch him up,' said Chris.

'He'll find his way,' said Genevieve. 'The reception staff will point him in the right direction.' She put a hand on his sleeve.

'While they're talking business, would you like to see the gardens?'

The Emperor Abu ibn Walid looked as excited and tired as a child who'd been up all night waiting for Santa. His advisers and staff were still packing up after the meeting, standing around the long table and waving bits of printout at one another. They looked stressed, rings under eyes, the look of people who'd not only seen some disturbing news footage but had to do something about it.

The Emperor shook the Doctor's hand warmly. Two security guards watched, both in the dark-blue and white uniforms of the household. Each had one enhanced eye. The Doctor could see the irises moving as they scanned him for hidden weapons. He wondered what technology was hidden by the Emperor's own mismatched eyes.

'Please,' said the Emperor, 'I've been in this office all morning. Let's talk in my private garden.'

The 'garden' was a rainforest, a vast dome. Callisto's terraformed climate couldn't sustain these damp plants, delicate ferns and exotic flowers. The Doctor expected that every guest was brought here. Fancy clothes, elaborate feasts, expensive gifts

– even mammoth starships wouldn't impress another noble. A living garden, millions of miles from Earth – now, there was a status symbol.

They walked along an AG path, half a foot off the ground, translucent enough to let the artificial sunshine through to the tiny plants beneath it. The guards walked a discreet distance behind them. The Doctor could feel their artificial eyes on his back.

The former Duke said, 'In the last twenty-four hours, the new peace has been broken by a dozen riots on Earth. They started as peaceful, mass demonstrations. A variety of demands. The largest is in Australia – twelve thousand Earth Reptiles walked out of the ocean and sat down on a tourist beach. After a few hours, the locals started attacking them with surfboards.' The Doctor shook his head. 'The Landsknechte have gone in, but I think you can also help me calm things down.'

'How can I do that?' asked the Doctor.

'I need the full story of the Empress's death. I think uncertainty about how I came to power is the motive behind these demonstrations. I think it's safe to tell your story, especially now a replacement for Helen the First has been found – my legal advisers tell me it would have been treason to ignore her direct request.'

'I'll give you my full cooperation,' said the Doctor. 'But first, there's something I need to warn you about. There's a moon in the Agamemnon system. It's called Iphigenia.'

‘Agamemnon. I’ve heard of it,’ said Walid. ‘One of the planets exploded, didn’t it? The Navy are still trying to decide exactly what happened.’

‘Cassandra is no longer a danger. It’s Iphigenia you have to worry about. You’ve got to keep ships away from that moon. The people in the original fact-finding mission murdered one another, and the survivors are… insane.’

Walid took a DataStream from his pocket and tapped his finger on the screen. The Doctor admired an orchid while the palmtop, a square chunk of intelligent plastic, organized the information the Emperor wanted.

‘I see what you mean,’ said Walid. ‘And the recent expedition is believed to have been killed in the Cassandra explosion. It certainly seems as though there’s a curse on the moon.’

‘It’s worse than that,’ said the Doctor. ‘No one must ever go there again. If you want to keep this new Empire of yours safe, you’ve got to keep that world completely isolated. It might even be worth ending mining operations on Fury, evacuating the population. At least the telepaths.’

‘You’ve been there, haven’t you, Doctor?’ said Walid. ‘You were part of one of the expeditions.’ The Doctor nodded. ‘And what did you see?’

The Doctor considered for a moment. ‘Everything,’ he said.

‘Everything?’

‘You’ll love these,’ said Genevieve. ‘They’re astonishing.

Watch.’

They had been walking through one of the Duke’s gardens, planted with flowers and floweroids from all over the Empire.

Jupiter hung overhead in the thin blue of the sky, an impossibly large ball of colour. It was almost noon.

Chris had been telling Genevieve about some of his adventures as they worked their way through a maze, but she seemed even more interested in life in the lower levels. It wasn’t just polite interest, either: it was the same curiosity as had driven Chris’s mother to watch

endless docudramas about life at Court.

Now she had stopped at a tall hedge, covered with soft red flowers. The leaves were hexagonal, waxy and dark. The flowers 256

were the colour of wine, the petals geometric, complex, bunched into angular fists.

‘Stay there,’ she said. He stood on the path, obediently, as she stepped up to the hedge. She cupped one of the flowers in her hand, held it there for a moment.

‘Now you try,’ she said.

Chris peered at the bush, hesitant. ‘What does it do?’ he said.

‘Go on,’ she said. ‘Hold one of the flowers.’

He reached out and cupped one of the roses in his hand.

It uncurled, slowly, a silky movement across his skin. He watched, half expecting the thing to bite him, but it just opened and opened until it filled his palm.

‘See,’ said Genevieve. ‘It only does that with people who’ve got some latent psi ability.’

Chris looked up at her. ‘What?’

‘Not full-blown psis, it just ignores them. But it can tell if you’ve got a little bit of ability, or just the genes.’ She stroked the open flower in his palm. ‘No one knows why.’

‘It’s beautiful,’ he said.

‘Lady Genevieve,’ said a voice behind them. ‘It would be a good idea if you went into the palace now.’

They both looked up. A woman in white was watching them from the path. A moment later, a dozen security guards stepped out from another pathway in the maze.

‘Iaomnet,’ said Chris, staring at the woman.

‘What’s going on?’ said Genevieve.

‘Won’t you come with us, Mr Cwej?’ said Iaomnet. Her voice was like

an angel choir, dozens of voices coming out of her mouth. ‘It’s almost time for the conjunction.’

‘Everything,’ said the Doctor.

Walid was giving him a polite but sceptical look. ‘I’m not sure I understand, Doctor.’

‘Have you heard of a covert organization calling itself the Brotherhood?’ said the Doctor.

‘I know the name,’ said Walid. ‘Are they real, then? I thought they’d been dreamt up by some of the more paranoid investigators.’ There’s that word again, thought the Doctor. The 257

Adjudicators have been assuring the Court for years that the Brotherhood don’t exist.’

No wonder Armand had been let off so lightly. ‘Oh, they exist.

It’s my belief they were behind the attack on you at my trial. The second expedition to Iphigenia was a secret mission for the Brotherhood.’

Walid consulted his DataStream again, running his thumbnail across the top of his moustache. ‘I see we had an Imperial agent aboard. She seems to have disappeared.’

‘Find her,’ said the Doctor. ‘She’ll confirm what I’m telling you.’

‘Doctor,’ said Walid, ‘if I’m going to keep the Empire safe from this threat, you’re going to have to tell me what it is. I need to know everything you know about it.’

‘I can’t tell you,’ said the Doctor. ‘Not precisely.’

‘Doctor,’ said Walid again. ‘I need to know everything you know about it.’

The Time Lord looked up from the fern he’d been examining.

Professor Martinique was standing a little way down the path, hands clasped in front of him, his face perfectly blank.

‘Good grief,’ said the Doctor.

Walid was looking at him with amusement. ‘You look surprised,

Doctor.'

The Time Lord shrugged in irritation. 'I didn't think you'd be so unsubtle.'

Walid shrugged. 'I'm the Emperor now,' he said. 'I can do whatever I like.' He consulted his DataStream. 'The conjunction occurs in ten minutes,' he told Martinique. 'You'd better hurry.'

Chris knew the routine: he expected a dungeon and fists and needles. Instead, they led him through the maze, two guards behind him and two in front, the hedges high on either side.

Funny, this wasn't half as nerve-racking as meeting the Duke would have been.

Genevieve had been bundled back to the palace by a couple of security guards. He figured she'd been told to take him somewhere secluded, but she had been as surprised as he had when Iaomnet turned up with her weird, weird voice.

Eventually they came to an open area, a lawn. There were rose bushes and a white gazebo. It was so quiet.

'Have a seat, Chris,' said Iaomnet in her choir voice. A very scared-looking Jeopard was waiting with cucumber sandwiches.

'What happened to you?' he asked, taking one of the chairs in the gazebo. The security guards stood just behind him, where he couldn't see them.

'I speak for the Brotherhood,' she said. 'We picked up Ms Wszola shortly after her return to Imperial Intelligence.' The Jeopard looked so awkward, Chris took a sandwich just to make him feel better. 'We were dissatisfied with her debriefing. There was too much she wasn't able to tell us. We needed a closer look.'

Chris stopped with the sandwich halfway to his mouth. 'You killed her,' he said, aghast.

'She is not dead,' said the Brotherhood. 'She is, however, not here. Chris, we are aware of your presence on Yemaya Four in the year 2257.'

Chris wondered what they'd do if he tried to fight. They wanted something from him – badly enough to keep him alive?

'What about it?'

'We know that you are a latent psi.'

'I'm not a latent psi,' said Chris. 'I've got some recessive genes, that's all. And the cure we came up with for the Yemaya virus has probably mucked those up anyway.'

The Brotherhood said, 'Incorrect. You have immense potential with the necessary treatment.'

'You want to make me telepathic again,' said Chris. The Brotherhood just looked at him. Iaomnet's eyes and face were blank. It was like talking to a robot – her eyes reminded him of something, he couldn't think what. 'You bastards. You think it's OK to do whatever you like to people's minds.'

'We know you were traumatized by your experiences with telepathy on Yemaya Four,' they said. 'You will be similarly traumatized. Your mind will open like the flower you examined.

We will learn everything about the Doctor from you, and everything you know about the Nexus.'

'And then I'll end up like Iaomnet? Just a machine to do your talking for you?'

'No, Chris,' said the Brotherhood. 'Iaomnet possessed no psychic potential. You are precious. You will be the first to be liberated from silence.'

Chris stared at them for a moment. The plan was suddenly obvious. 'You're going to make everyone telepathic.'

'Telepathic. Psychokinetic. Pyrokinetic. Clairvoyant.

Psychometric. Precognitive. Capable of teleportation and psychic healing. All those with the potential will be brought to fruition.'

'You're going to turn the whole world on?' said Chris. 'You've got another virus, haven't you?'

‘We do not have another virus,’ said the Brotherhood. ‘That technology could not do the work on the necessary scale.’

‘What, then?’ said Chris.

‘It is time,’ said the Brotherhood. ‘The conjunction is occurring.’

‘The conjunction? What do you –’

‘Shall we continue?’ said Professor Martinique. The pepper-haired professor waited for an answer from his guest.

The Doctor sat in a comfy chair in one of the private apartments. His arms rested on the chair’s arms, his head rested against the back of the chair. It took him a moment to get his breath back. ‘Yes,’ he said.

He shifted.

His body changed, stretching and altering, but it wasn’t some kind of grotesque biological movement, just a smooth, almost mathematical change.

‘Anything interesting?’ said Martinique.

It wasn’t Martinique. Martinique was very obviously brain-dead, his empty skull echoing with the voices of the Brotherhood’s leadership. The gestalt that consulted on every decision.

It wasn’t the Doctor, either. Not exactly. He was tall and imposing and blond, but he wore black, and a brightly coloured waistcoat with a golden badge in the shape of a cat.

‘This is who I would have been if I hadn’t regenerated,’ he said. ‘Or one of them. He seems a very serious fellow. His experience with Fenric changed him a great deal.’

He changed again, flowing back into his own shape. Sweat was running down into his eyes. He moved trembling fingers over his brow. They felt insubstantial, fading.

Walid felt safe. Too safe. Safe enough to let his allies crawl out of the shadows in his own palace. He wasn’t even here, he’d left them to it.

‘This is what Zatopek told you,’ he breathed. ‘He must have seen the pattern of the ley lines. Learnt that one passes right through Earth’s

solar system. That's what attracted the N-form we encountered in 1987.'

The Doctor had counted twelve alternatives so far. Presumably they couldn't use any of the timelines where he was dead. There must be thousands of those. That left all the different paths his life hadn't taken.

'One of these selves,' said the Brotherhood, 'will tell us what we need to know.'

'There must be another Nexus here,' said the Doctor. 'Hidden somewhere in Earth's solar system. There are only a few places it might be concealed.' He heard his voice changing as the probability intercession gripped him again, flowing over him.

'You only think you can control your pet Nexus. Otherwise you wouldn't need my help.'

'Who is this?'

The Doctor wore full ceremonial Time Lord robes. He lifted a hand to his curly hair. 'This is an earlier version of myself who became President of the Time Lords.'

'We must remember that one,' said the Brotherhood. 'Shall we continue?'

The Doctor looked at him as his face flowed back. 'Yes,' he said.

Chris shook his head. He felt as though he was being rebooted, like a primitive computer. 'Cold start,' he said.

Shhh, said the Brotherhood. *Don't use your mouth.*

'My mouth?' said Chris.

Don't use your mouth, repeated the Brotherhood.

Chris realized he was slumped forward in his chair, as though he'd nodded off. He sat up straight.

Nothing had changed. He was still sitting in the gazebo, on a long Callisto morning, facing what the Brotherhood had done to Iaomnet.

Everything has changed, said the Brotherhood.

Chris looked at himself. He was wearing black. Tight black trousers, black shirt with a high collar, tall black boots with four wraparound buckles. His big jacket was hanging over the back of the chair.

His normal uniform, then. He looked at the rank flash over his left breast. A balance, bright red. He was still the Pontifex Saecularis, then.

Everything has changed, the Brotherhood insisted.

Chris listened.

There were two guards behind him. One was bored by all the weirdness, and was admiring the garden, because he'd been stuck on a courier run for over a week and it was nice to be breathing fresh air again. The other was focused, watching Chris's back for the slightest sign of trouble, determined to do his job right for the Emperor. Both of them were Brotherhood operatives, not psis, just hired muscle.

'What have you done to me?' he said cautiously.

The Brotherhood said, in one hundred and seven perfectly clear voices, *You are one of us now. Not one of the gestalt. One of the Brotherhood. Tell us everything you know about the Nexus. Help us. Join us. You are us.*

'We were right,' said Chris. 'There is another Nexus. Another fake crater. On Tethys. That's why the Brotherhood was there, in the Temple of the Goddess.'

The Brotherhood just watched him. He needed to stall for time, find out what was going on. 'What are you waiting for?' he said.

He stood up, pulling on his jacket, smoothing the shoulders so the red epaulettes sat straight. 'What do you expect me to do?'

What you did on Yemaya, said the Brotherhood patiently.

'You're going to do this to everybody,' he said. 'You know what it is and you know how to use it.' Goddess, it was obvious 262

now, the investigation coming together. 'No. You don't know how to use it. Just a little bit. Just enough to twist those poor people into monsters. Just enough to make little changes. You switched allegiance

from Armand to Walid when you saw which one had the best chance of becoming Emperor. Do you know what I did on Yemaya?'

He looked at the Brotherhood. Iaomnet's face stared blankly back.

'Bang,' said Chris.

He reached out and cut off her connection to the gestalt.

She tumbled out of her chair, becoming a tangle of arms and legs on the gazebo floor.

'He shouldn't be able to do that,' said one of the guards.

Chris turned around. He shoved with all the might of his enhanced mind. They both flew backward, one flipping over the railing, the other smashing right through the plastiwood and landing in a pile of splinters.

'He shouldn't be able to do that, either!' shouted the second guard.

'And who is this?' The Brotherhood said through Martinique's mouth.

'My name is Huitzilin,' said the man with the blue eyes. 'And I think you've just made a very serious mistake.' He reached out for the Brotherhood's speaker with a hungry hand.

But the hand was shifting, suddenly, and the Doctor was back.

He lost his balance, tumbling from the chair.

'We have only another ten minutes of conjunction,' said Martinique, in his dozens of voices. 'I think we should move on to the alternatives in which you died.'

The Doctor tensed on the floor, trying to get up.

The Brotherhood watched as the change washed over him. 'I see,' they said. 'In this alternative, your throat was torn open by a werewolf. Intriguing.' They watched as the change ebbed away.

'Again?' said the Brotherhood.

'Yes,' moaned the Doctor. His fingers dug into the carpet, as though trying to find something to hold on to.

The change flowed over him. ‘In this alternative,’ said the Brotherhood, ‘you died of shock while being interrogated by a military telepath.’

The Brotherhood watched as the Doctor’s existence stretched and changed, stretched and changed. ‘A long life, and a busy one,’ they said. ‘And thousands of moments where you *might* have died.’

‘I’ll die before I help you,’ he whispered.

‘Yes,’ said the Brotherhood. ‘Thousands of times.’

‘You won’t find a reality where I helped you.’

‘Again?’ said the Brotherhood.

Stop this.

Martinique joined him on the floor, open-eyed marionette, dropped and empty.

‘What happened?’ breathed the Doctor. He seemed to be himself again. It was just that he didn’t seem to be able to get up off the floor.

Genevieve wanted to go to the Emperor and ask him what the hell was going on. She wanted to know why the palace was suddenly full of strangers, why half the security guards had been replaced, and what they wanted with Chris Cwej.

Part of her mind was telling her to accept the changes as a natural part of Walid’s coronation. Of course he was upgrading the staff, of course there’d be all sorts of strange visitors. She knew she could trust the Duke, the Emperor.

Even if for some strange reason he didn’t want to talk to her at the moment. For the last week.

Part of her mind was telling her to get out, fast.

Her mother’s wedding presents had included five acres of reclaimed land in Kenya, a gorgeous candelabra, a city block in New Zealand, and a secret château on Triton hidden under one of the cryovulcanism research bases, deep in a crater that spat out liquid nitrogen at odd intervals. It had a numbered account and a robot staff and no one in their right mind would go anywhere near it. ‘The Duke’s a powerful man,’ said her mother. ‘If he ever does anything that makes you

afraid, go right there. And call me.'

264

Genevieve pulled on a red suit and some sensible shoes and pocketed the keycard to the safe house. She stuffed her handbag with credit cards and added a personal blaster. She left a message in her open diary saying she was going to do some shopping on Europa.

She was halfway to her shuttle when she heard the screams.

She looked back at the maze, horrified. What were they doing to that poor man?

A figure burst from the maze. For a moment she expected to see Mr Cwej, the security guards in full pursuit.

But it was Nikin, the little Jeopard servant.

' *Haraktai'en!* ' the Jeopard shouted, racing past. Genevieve caught the lithe cat-man. ' *Ja'Ra'shten shay!* ' he yelled, trying to break free. ' *Ke cepep shay, haran, Ja'Ra'shten, Ke mishtla ke misht, haran!* '

Genevieve said, ' *Ra'shten shay?* '

' *Ja'Turtle,* ' said the Jeopard. He looked back into the lab complex in terror. ' *Jiran tai? Ke Ched Ja'Ra'shten. Jiran tai?* '

' *Jiranai,* ' Genevieve let the alien go. He bolted.

There were shots from inside the maze.

The Turtle is here. The one who eats everyone.

Genevieve started running towards the maze.

No, said a voice in her head, loud as a shout in the ear. She dropped the gun, pressing her hands to her ears.

Doctor!

The Doctor was still lying on the floor. It was a particularly comfortable carpet, a pleasant shade of lilac.

At least he'd managed to keep Roz out of all of this. Out of the centre of it, at any rate. There was still a way out for her.

Get up, Doctor, said Chris.

All she had to do was not get involved.

Doctor, said Chris, *you have to get out of here. You have to get back to the* Model Citizen *right now.*

'Why?' said the Doctor. 'What's the point? It's just one damned thing after another.'

Don't you dare give up, said Chris. *Get your Gallifreyan butt up off that floor and run for it.*

265

'What happened to you?' said the Doctor, grabbing the chair and pulling himself up.

I'll make sure you get there. Go, Doctor.

'I can't leave you here!'

Don't be stupid, said Chris, *I'm coming with you!*

Genevieve ran through the palace. Ever since the coronation, there had been guards everywhere. Now they all seemed to have run out into the garden.

But there were some who couldn't leave their posts. Genevieve spotted Grey Cloud, one of the Duke's personal guard, in the foyer, talking frantically into a communicator.

'Well, I don't know either!' he said. 'Just find him.'

'Grey Cloud,' she said, running up to him. 'Where's the Duke?'

He looked right through her. 'He can't be invisible,' said Grey Cloud. 'Not to the psi bloodhounds. I don't want to hear it! Just find him!'

She waved her hand in front of his face. He didn't see it.

Right, the voice in her head had got to Grey Cloud, too. She needed to use that help while it lasted. 'Where is he?' she shouted.

He heard her. *Second level. Office with light purple carpet.*

'I know the one,' she said out loud.

There's only five minutes of the conjunction left, said the voice.

Five minutes to get out of here.

Genevieve snatched the DataStream from her trousers pocket.

She tapped in her security codes. Not fast enough.

She closed her eyes, activated the biode, and flicked her way through the menus, faster and faster.

Do you want to come with us? the voice wanted to know.

'Don't break my concentration!' she snapped.

The Doctor bolted out through a side door and legged it for the landing site.

Change rippled through him, changing his height and weight, sending him sprawling across the lawn. Unfamiliar, long-fingered 266

hands tried to push him up, but the change moved through him again, making the world spin.

Someone grabbed him and pulled him to his feet. Chris, in a strange uniform, ten years too old.

'Who was that?' asked Chris.

'Me,' said the Doctor. 'Don't tell me who I was like. What I will be like.' He looked at Chris. 'Oh,' he said.

'Let's get to the *Model Citizen*,' said Chris. 'Genevieve is running interference for us. We can exchange notes once we're aboard.'

The Doctor followed Chris as they ran for the ship. Behind them there were shouts and shots, but distant. It was as though they were invisible. Or the guards were distracted by something else.

'Your pilot's ready to leave,' said Chris.

The Doctor decided to ask later. They clambered up the ladder into the shuttle. The Doctor shut the airlock and the ship immediately lifted off, throwing them against a wall. It was a moment before the stabilizers cut in.

The shuttle was small, cockpit, lounge area, facilities and storage. The

Doctor ran forward. Roz was glaring at the controls, hands moving fast. ‘They’ve launched an interceptor,’ she said.

‘They’re going to shoot us down?’

‘No. It’ll just use force fields to suck us into its cargo bay. It’s three times as fast as we are.’

‘Keep going – maybe we’ll think of something,’ said the Doctor. He leant heavily on the door frame. The changes had stopped, at least. Or they were so subtle now he wasn’t noticing.

‘I don’t believe it,’ said Roz. ‘That interceptor just changed course. It’s heading away from us. Look.’

The Doctor checked the tactical screen. ‘There’s nothing on its course,’ he said. ‘It’s chasing a ghost.’

‘Your doing?’ said Roz.

He shook his head. ‘Thank you, Lady Genevieve,’ he said.

The Doctor and Chris stared at each other.

The *Model Citizen* was a standard, comfortable shuttle design –

cockpit, a cabin like a lounge, a kitchen and facilities. There were 267

six seats, in rows beneath the windows, facing one another across the cabin.

The Doctor and Chris sat opposite each other and stared.

‘It’s good to see you again,’ said the Pontifex Saecularis, at last.

‘When did you last see me?’ the Doctor asked, cautiously.

‘Nine – no, ten years ago,’ said Chris. ‘In subjective time, anyway.’ He looked down. ‘Look, there’s no easy way to say this. You died. On Yemaya.’

The Doctor nodded. ‘The story had a different ending.’ He held up a hand. ‘Don’t bother with how. It doesn’t matter. We only have a few minutes anyway.’

The cockpit door slid open, the pilot standing in the doorway.

‘Roslyn!’ said the Pontifex. ‘I didn’t dare believe it.’

She took a good, long look at him. He was surprised how much that look could rattle him, even after all these years.

‘Nice boots,’ she said.

‘Thanks,’ he said. ‘Lady Forrester – you are the Lady Roslyn Forrester?’

Roz stared. ‘Not exactly. I knew I couldn’t let you two out of my sight without *something* happening.’

‘There’s a second Nexus in the solar system,’ said the Doctor.

Roz listened to the Time Lord, but she wouldn’t take her eyes off Chris. The Pontifex found himself shifting in his seat like a nervous schoolboy.

The Doctor had taken out his abacus, muttering to himself.

‘They have control of it. But not real control, not full control.’

Chris nodded. ‘Or they wouldn’t have needed to interrogate us.

They could have just whisked us out of existence.’ He made a gesture with his hand. ‘Whoosh, and we’re gone.’

The Doctor looked at him. ‘And they certainly wouldn’t have chosen this particular Chris out of all the possibilities.’

‘How’d you make Pontifex?’ Roz wanted to know.

‘I’m carrying SLEEPY around in my temporal lobe,’ said Chris. He felt her horror even before her expression changed.

‘I’m ludicrously telepathic. Don’t worry, I’m not reading your mind. I don’t bother unless I need to.’

‘Like when you’re questioning a criminal,’ said Roz. ‘I see.’

‘I wonder what they told Walid,’ Chris said.

‘The same thing they told Armand,’ said the Doctor. ‘That they had a weapon, or a tool, depending on how you look at it, capable of altering reality.’

‘So they kidnapped you two to demonstrate it?’ said Roz.

‘No,’ said the Doctor. ‘Walid left in a hurry just after we were taken prisoner. Ah.’ He beamed at the abacus. ‘I think I know just where.’

‘You can’t be certain until the conjunction ends,’ said Chris.

‘No. But I have a pretty good idea.’ The Doctor turned to Roz.

‘You were supposed to run for it at the first sign of trouble,’ he said sternly.

‘Be real,’ said Roz. ‘I’d have been a cloud of expanding vapour the moment they got a lock on me.’

‘They had what they wanted. Why waste ammunition on a low-ranking pilot?’

‘Maybe. They’re ignoring us right now, and I’ll just bet you two know why.’

‘Genevieve,’ said Chris. ‘She used her security access codes to confuse and disable part of the security systems. And then there’s me. Doctor, there are only ninety seconds left in the conjunction.’

‘What’s that mean?’ demanded Roz.

‘It means I can’t keep up this telepathic screen much longer,’

said Chris. ‘When it drops, we’re going to appear on a lot of screens. Despite the confusion on the ground, there are at least three pursuit ships in our vicinity.’

‘There’s something I’d like to try,’ said the Doctor.

Chris read what he wanted right off the surface of his conscious thoughts. ‘Damn, that’s devious. All right. But just a moment.’

Chris got up. He found himself crossing the tiny amount of space between them. Roz just stared at him and he folded her up in his arms and kissed her.

He wasn’t sure, given the parameters of this reality, whether it was the appropriate thing to do. Given the way she was holding the hair at the back of his neck, he still wasn’t sure.

‘It’s been a long time, Lady Forrester,’ he said.

‘I’ll go program the computer for evasive manoeuvres, then, shall I?’ she said hoarsely, and fled to the cockpit.

269

Chris sat back down. ‘Jack White killed her,’ he said, very softly.

‘Fifty seconds,’ said the Doctor.

The Doctor and Chris reached across the narrow cabin, sitting forward in their seats until their hands met. They grasped each other’s hands tightly. The Doctor bowed his head, almost as if he was in prayer.

‘Thirty seconds,’ said the Pontifex. ‘I hope this works.’

‘Anything could happen,’ said the Doctor. ‘History’s out of control.’

‘The Nexus,’ said Chris.

‘No,’ said the Doctor. ‘Just the usual chaos.’

Chris felt the conjunction drop away. It was like letting go of your grip on a window ledge. He felt something pass over and through him, anchoring itself even as he fell. He grabbed at the Doctor’s hands, grabbed at his mind, tried to find something to hold on to.

‘Let go!’ the Doctor cried out. *Let go!*

If you suddenly had never existed, would you know you’d ever lived?

Some questions were too hard to answer. He let go.

‘We’ll be in Ionian space in ten minutes,’ Roz shouted. She’d left the cockpit door open so the Doctor could hear her. ‘How is he? Back to normal, OK?’

The Doctor looked up from Chris. The young man was lying on the seat under the window, looking ordinary and rather pale in his servant’s uniform, muttering about lemmings and Uruguay.

‘He’ll be all right,’ he called out. ‘Containing multitudes is an exhausting exercise.’

‘Good, good,’ called Roz.

The Doctor got up and stood in the door of the tiny cockpit.

Callisto was a spotty brown ball ahead.

‘I wish you could wake him up,’ said Roz. ‘We could use an experienced pilot.’ She brushed her fingers across one of the screens. The Doctor saw two points of light, a red line indicating their current course. ‘I think they’re going to intercept us. I’m not sure. One thing I am sure about – this ship was never meant for 270

tactical manoeuvres. If they catch us, it’s two tanks and a school bus.’

The Doctor’s eyes went to another screen. It showed a TopTenPercent media report. Explosions, seen from orbit, ugly blossoms in a patchwork atmosphere, blue, brown, red. It was so important that Roz was watching it while they were escaping.

‘What’s happened?’

‘Someone’s dropped a comet on Purgatory,’ she said.

‘The Imperial Landsknechte training planet,’ breathed the Doctor. ‘It’s started.’

‘It’s not Walid,’ said Roz. ‘Why drop a bomb on your own troops?’

‘Unless the Landsknechte have gone rogue. If they challenged him…’

‘Maybe. There’s been nothing like that on the news. More to the point, why bomb their school? It’s not a strategic target.’

‘It’s a warning,’ said the Doctor. ‘This could be you.’

‘It must be Armand,’ said Roz.

There was an awkward silence.

It was broken when the communicator bleeped. ‘Oh shit,’ said Roz. ‘Wish me luck.’

The Doctor stepped back out of range of the screen. He heard voices from the cockpit as he sat down to watch the news.

Purgatory had been hit by a comet dropped into its atmosphere.

It was a bizarre world, composed of great hexagonal slices of other people’s planets, dozens of ecologies. The better to train the Landsknechte to go out and blow them up.

The comet had been mostly ice. It had melted as it struck the atmosphere, chunks of rock exploding out of its core. They had rained down all over the training world. Casualties were down in the tens of thousands – there weren't more than a few hundred thousand troopers on Purgatory at any given time.

This could be you.

It was war.

In the cockpit, Roz yelled, 'Yeah, and I happen to be the newly appointed Pontifex Saecularis, which means I'm your bosses'

worst nightmare. Turn your arse around and go back to Io!'

A moment later, she appeared in the doorway. 'That worked.'

271

'I thought the job didn't begin for a month,' said the Doctor.

'It's been all over the media,' said Roz. 'I told them I'd taken the pair of you prisoner, and it was a jurisdictional problem.'

The Doctor looked at her. 'And is it?' he said.

Roz leant in the doorway, looking at him.

'You might be asked to choose sides, Roz. Very soon,' he told her. 'Do you want my advice?'

'Yeah,' she said.

'Don't.'

She was about to reply when Chris said. 'Oooooh. *That sucked.* '

Leabie was waiting for them in the docking bay. She was dressed in a simple black pants suit, the house's blue and red log glittering on her shoulder.

The Doctor popped out of the *Model Citizen* like a cork out of a champagne bottle. 'Lady Forrester!' he said. 'I have urgent news.

I need to borrow another ship. Something that can defend itself this time. Chris can pilot it.'

Leabie looked past him. ‘Roslyn,’ she said. ‘I need your help.’

‘Now’s the time to strike,’ said Leabie. 'Walid’s away from the palace and no one knows where the hell he is.’

‘Jesus,’ said Roz. She sat the opposite end of a long meeting table, in a room full of historical portraits. The lights were low.

‘How long have you been planning this?’

‘Forever,’ said Leabie. ‘Forever.’ She stared at Roz down the table. The message DataStream she carried with her pipped every few seconds. ‘Don’t tell me that you disapprove, because that’s not going to stop anything.’

‘Hell, no,’ said Roz. ‘Walid’s a conspirator and probably a loon. The bastards he’s got working for him killed Mantsebo and Somezi trying to get to you. All I want to know is how many people you’re willing to kill to become Empress.’

‘As many as it takes, darling,’ said Leabie. ‘This isn’t like choosing a new carpet. It isn’t the sort of project you go into with one eye open. It’s taken ten years to create a fleet and an army that’s up to the task.’

Roz nodded to herself. She got up, wandering down the table, and poured herself a glass of water.

‘The plan was designed to keep casualties to a minimum,’ said her sister. ‘We don’t have the Emperor’s resources. What we have is strategy and surprise. A lot of surprise. The Landsknechte have been caught with their pants down twice. First at Purgatory, next on Mars.’

‘Mars?’ Roz sat on the table, a few chairs away from Leabie, drinking the water and wishing for some serious alcohol. ‘What’s happening on Mars?’

‘It hasn’t hit the newsfeeds yet. But they deployed something like a quarter of their troops to suppress the rioting on Earth.’

‘Riots you started,’ said Roz.

‘As I said. Strategy and surprise.’

‘Shit.’ Roz found a very evil grin wandering across her face.

‘You old bitch.’

‘Fancy a little treason, little sister?’

Roz sat in the seat next to her sister, watching the urgent messages flashing on her DataStream.

‘One thing I have to know first,’ she said. ‘How do I know the new boss isn’t going to be just the same as the old boss?’

Leabie looked at her.

‘How do I know you’re not going to be another Empress?’ said Roz. ‘Or another Walid? How do I know you’re going to be better?’

‘That’s easy,’ said Leabie. ‘Because you’ll be there.’

Roz folded her arms. ‘You’ve been making a lot of people a lot of promises, Leabie. You’ve professed a lot of beliefs I know you don’t have. The Ogrons and the Earth Reptiles, and the resistance, they’re all expecting you to make their world better.

They’re dying because you’ve promised to make it worth their while.’

Leabie said nothing. ‘You see,’ said Roz, ‘it’s going to be my job to make sure you keep your word, whether you believe in the causes or not. Fair’s fair.’

Leabie smiled ruefully. ‘You never used to let me get away with anything.’

Roz took a good, hard look at her sister. ‘True,’ she said at last.

‘You said there was something you wanted me to do.’

The Doctor paced. It made Chris feel exhausted to watch him.

‘You’re certain you’re up to this flight?’ said the Doctor, glancing at him as he paced the ready room. ‘Just say the word, and I’ll fly the thing myself as soon as it’s ready.’

‘I’m fine,’ said Chris. He was watching EmpireGold. ‘Can you believe this, they’re fighting in Achebe Gorge. There hasn’t been fighting on Mars for centuries. Not since the Ice Warriors.’

The Doctor walked back and forth, back and forth. His clothes were crumpled again, his brown velvet waistcoat unbuttoned. He flipped out his pocket watch, looked at it, flipped it back.

'There's not much information,' said Chris. 'I might try one of the other newsfeeds. Either nothing's getting out or they're censoring it.'

An engineer walked into the ready room. A young man, he couldn't be twenty. He saw the shots of Mars on the screen. 'Any news?' he asked, in a thin voice.

'Nothing new, really,' said Chris. 'Not for the last hour.'

'I've got family there,' he said. 'My mum runs a kiosk on the Olympus Mons ski slope.'

'I'm sure she's OK,' said Chris. 'Right now all the fighting's around Achebe.'

'Thanks. Sorry,' said the young engineer. 'That wasn't what I came in to say. Your shuttle's ready, sir.'

'Great!' Chris bounced to his feet. 'Doctor! Let's go!'

'Go and warm her up,' said the Doctor. 'I'll be there in a minute.'

Roz walked out of the meeting room, feeling light-headed. The Doctor came out of nowhere and grabbed her arm.

'If you're a party to this madness, Roz, then the friendship between us is finished.'

'Not a chance,' said Roz.

He looked at her, astonished. 'Do you think I'm joking?'

She grabbed him by the lapels. She'd always wanted to do that.

'We've stared into the abyss together, you and I, Doctor. Jesus, 274

the things that we have seen. And when all those *children* you call your companions have their fits of moral anguish and cover up their eyes because of the things you have to do just remember who it is that stands by you. Who does the necessary even when the necessary costs.'

The Doctor stared at her, silent, his blue eyes piercing right into her

skull. She resisted the temptation to shake him, stop him staring.

‘Finished? We’ll never be finished, Doctor, because *you owe me*. So you can threaten Bernice and Dorothée, you can show your human side for the cameras, but *I know*. That history kills people and sometimes even *you* can’t save them. So you owe me this, for my family, for the children of the angry man and for the ones that died in the slave ships and mines and all the others you couldn’t save at the time.’

‘Millions will die.’

‘Millions are dying already.’

‘Oh,’ said the Doctor. ‘Only now they’ll die for truth and justice.’

‘Well, it’s better than dying for a profit margin.’

‘And what about you?’ said the Doctor softly.

‘Jesus, will you quit it with the stare?’ Roz let go of his lapels.

‘What about me?’

‘If you step back into history, I won’t be able to protect you.’

‘This isn’t history, Doctor,’ said Roz. ‘This is family.’

2

Valhalla

When you come home from a long trip away, and everyone wants to know what it was like, you find yourself telling the same stories over and over. After a while, the anecdotes become polished, the rough edges of detail worn away in your memory.

War is like that. Seen in the quiet aftermath, war reduces itself to a series of phrases and photos, place names and images. A man shoots a bound man through the head. Women dancing in the street, showered with confetti. A child screams, running towards the camera. A pile of starved corpses, limbs like firewood.

The Three Days' War barely lasted long enough to produce its own set of images. There were one or two. A pair of battleships colliding near Phobos, the first spurt of flame from a ruptured plasma engine bursting free into space. An angry face in a rioting crowd in Brazil, scream of rage with no name or cause attached.

Even a Jeopard refugee, haunted, slit-pupil eyes in a weary breadline.

What most people remembered about the Three Days' War were the place names. Some of them already had battles attached, but after the Three Days' War, everyone would know which one you meant when you talked about the Battle of Achebe Gorge.

Or about Janus, or Purgatory, or the Valles Marianes, or Valhalla.

276

Mimas, 26 August 2982

Chris wished they could have taken a cutter, but every warship Leabie had was out there, somewhere… Instead they took Leabie's private shuttle, the *Zero Discipline*, newly installed proton cannon heavy on its back.

They fell towards Mimas, engines off, only the attitude jets puffing out compressed gas to keep them on course. He kept an eye on the monitor, keeping them just over the horizon. Mimas was a dirty lump of ice, a little rock buried under the surface.

Herschel Crater was almost half as wide as the moon itself.

The Doctor was running a simulation on the shuttle's computer, his hands nervous on the controls. 'Tethys is tidally locked,' he said. Chris glanced across to the screen. Its great crater always points in the same direction, thirty degrees above the ecliptic. A signal from there would drift out into space, well clear of the other moons and planets.

'But Mimas's crater is locked only two degrees above the ecliptic. Shoot a beam from the centre of Herschel, and it would pass through

the entire solar system, slightly more often than once a day.'

Chris watched the projected red line moving across the surface of the Earth, connecting the icy moon with the distant, living world. 'You'd only get twenty to thirty minutes' contact per day,'

said the Doctor. 'But that would be enough.'

'So is it leaking?' said Chris. 'Like the one on Iphigenia?'

'No,' the Doctor said. 'They've found part of the original shielding mechanism. It was never meant to do what they're doing with it.'

'They're making it leak deliberately?' said Chris. 'They can make whatever changes they like? But only for thirty minutes at a time?'

'That's right,' said the Doctor. 'They think I can tell them how to stabilize the corrupt probabilities.'

'Can you?'

'Probably,' said the Doctor.

He sat back in the co-pilot's seat, staring out at Saturn as they fell towards its innermost moon. Distantly, flashes of light 277

reached them from a pair of warships locked in close combat in the Cassini Division.

'Take us in as close as you can,' he said. 'And then skim over the surface until we reach the lip of the crater.'

'Aye aye,' said Chris. Mimas's pocked surface was looming in the forward screen, blotting out everything else.

'Is the rescue autopilot set?'

'Doctor,' said Chris, 'that's the third time you've asked that.

It's a standard safety feature – of course it's switched on.

'I know, but it can be disabled for suicide work,' said the Doctor.

'Gee,' said Chris, 'you're not thinking of ramming the thing, are you?'

The Doctor picked a bit of imaginary dust off the console.

‘Damaging it is the last thing we want to do.’

‘So what is the plan?’ said Chris.

‘I need to reach the Nexus itself,’ said the Doctor. ‘Or rather, its real-world interface. It won’t be very large. It probably won’t be directly under the centre of the crater, but it will be buried deep.’

‘Close to the centre of the moon?’

‘That’s right.’

They were approaching the five-klick-high rim of Herschel.

‘People have speculated for centuries how a giant snowball could have survived so large an impact,’ said the Doctor softly.

‘So the whole thing is fake?’

‘The whole crater,’ said the Doctor. ‘Possibly the whole moon.’

‘Holy cow,’ said Chris. And then, ‘Christ!’

He fell back in his seat, hands jerking away from the controls.

His heart went into overdrive, his whole body jumping with the force of his pulse.

The Doctor was slumped in the co-pilot’s seat, head lolling to one side. Chris tried to reach out to him, but the pounding in his head got louder and louder until he decided it would be a very good idea to faint.

Kibero

278

Leabie’s war room had been a ballroom two days ago. Now it was packed with computers and people. Everyone wore a comm headset. Huge screens had been hung from the ceiling, covered in messages and 3D schematics. Soft lighting, big shadows on the grey walls.

Leabie stood with her advisers on a balcony that ran around the room. When Roz came in she wasn’t talking: she was just looking out over the room, her hands gripping the railing. Deep in thought. Roz decided not to bother her. Leabie didn’t seem to notice her as she walked through the crowd below.

There was a small communications room off the war room.

Roz waited until the woman inside was done, racing back out with a printout in her hand. She went in and shut the door.

It was very dark in here. There was just a desk, a chair, a laptop. Roz sat down at the computer and started up the comm link.

It was going to take the communications software a few minutes to track down the person she wanted to speak to. In the meantime, she put her feet up on the desk and closed her eyes.

The room had been soundproofed, she realized. You could even imagine that none of it was happening, that the room outside was empty and Leabie was upstairs somewhere chattering with a champagne glass in her hand instead of trying to take over the galaxy.

She wondered what the Doctor was doing. She wondered what the Doctor would do, in her shoes. She opened her eyes.

Whatever was necessary.

The console pinged. Roz looked into it. After a moment, the Acting Pontifex Saecularis appeared on the screen.

He was a skinny pale-skinned guy with big bags under his eyes. ‘Having a bad time, Malinowski?’ she asked.

‘Pontifex Saecularis!’ he said. ‘Yes, I am, as a matter of fact.

How can I help you, ma’am?’

‘I want you to keep the Order out of this. I don’t want the Adjudicators to take sides.’

Malinowski said nothing, but she saw his shoulders sag with relief.

279

‘Turn everyone out, get those riots under control. Civilians on Mars are going to need some relief once the fighting’s over. Get some people up there too. Stick to civil matters, Malinowski.’

‘Yes, ma’am.’

‘One other thing,’ she said. ‘I’ll be resigning my appointment, effective in exactly four days from now. When that order comes into effect,

you're going to be in charge of the Order. Think you can keep 'em under control?'

'Yes, ma'am!' said Malinowski. 'After all, by that time, every Adjudicator will have their hands full.'

'Exactly,' said Roz. 'I hope to be in contact with you again before the end of my time as Pontifex Saecularis.'

'Thank you, ma'am,' said Malinowski, sincerely.

She switched off the comm link and went back out into the war room.

Everyone was looking up. Roz followed the upturned faces until she saw the message, tall green letters unscrolling across one of the hanging screens as they decoded.

MARS – 27TH-AUG-2982 06:00 Lc1Tm – 10TH MH DROP

IN NOCTIS LABRYINTHUS

(20 DrpShps) (4 interface support) (Local Time = IST + 4) 2nd Wave

1st Wave -HOUR

3rd Wave

H + 2HRS

10/A, 10/B,

Flitter

TnkPlt (4)

10/C (12)

Assets

10/CS (6)

SP Battery (4)

Resupply

bHQ (2)

Stores (3)

Unopposed drop in advance of the main deployment of the 2nd Heavy Infantry Brigade. 1st wave unopposed, 2nd wave attacked by ImLand ICS (3rd Gwdr) in upper atmosphere. 1 DropShip carrying RHQ lost with all on board including the Colonel. Major Vincenzi detailed to assume battalion command while Lt Col Balotnikov takes over as Commander 10 mH.

280

Serious nods, even a smile or two. Colonel Ncube's loss was a damned shame, they were thinking, but otherwise everything was going just according to plan.

Roz walked up the staircase to where Leabie was sitting at a huge tilted screen, her advisers crowded around the edge.

'Roslyn!' she said, without looking up. 'What do you want?'

'A rank,' said Roz.

That got her attention. Her advisers didn't take their eyes off the screen, talking in quiet voices. 'Roz, you're a police officer, not a soldier.'

'I've done everything I can do here,' she said. 'I've sorted the Adjudicators for you.'

'And I may need you to sort them again,' she said. 'I want you here when the tidying up starts.'

'Leabie,' said Roz, 'give me a rank. I can't just sit here. I can't say yes to a war and then let it go on without me.'

'It won't go on without you,' said Leabie. 'I'll give you a strategic post. You've got some remarkable experience – we can use that.'

'My experience is all hands-on experience,' said Roz. 'Give me a rank.'

Leabie sighed. 'You never could just sit still,' she said. 'Do you want to talk about this privately?'

'No,' said Roz. 'There's isn't time. Listen, I won't be able to look the Doctor in the eye if I throw in my lot with your war and let someone else go out and die in my place.'

Leabie gave her an appalled look. ' *Usisi*,' she said, 'I need someone with brains and experience. I don't need a hero and I don't need a

martyr.'

'I thought the point of war was to make the other son of a bitch die for his country,' said Roz.

'I see you've grasped the basics,' said Leabie. 'All right,' she sighed. 'If you've got to go into action, I'll make you a colonel.

You can replace Ncube. But I want you to follow SOP, stay on the ship while your soldiers make the drop. That way we get the advantage of your experience.'

Roz nodded. 'Colonel,' she said. 'That's pretty good.'

281

'Pure nepotism, my dear,' said Leabie, turning back to the screen. The lights cast pale and worried shadows on her face.

Earth

Simon really should have taken another stim, but he decided instead to let his head rest on the window of the intercontinental hopper.

Pushback had been delayed because of the rioting; the Adjudicators had beaten the crowd back beyond the fringe of the transport terminal now. Outside was dark, and deceptively quiet, the hyperglass of the porthole shutting out the distant shouting and explosions.

He looked at himself in the glass. He looked as though he hadn't slept for three days, which was good, since he hadn't slept for four. His brown eyes were surrounded by bags dark enough to look like bruising. His hair hung loose, out of its usual queue.

There was a nasty cut on his cheek, still healing from two days ago in Overcity Five.

'Ladies and gentlemen,' announced the captain's voice, 'we're pleased to announce that we'll be under way in ten minutes.

We're grateful to you for bearing with us. Today's intercontinental flight will take twenty-five minutes. Light refreshments will be served once we're under way. Thank you.'

Simon punched up a newsfeed on the back of the seat in front of him. Riots in Overcity Six, riots in Overcity Five, demonstrations in Antarctica that looked as though they'd shortly turn into riots. A

complete both-way boycott by the Earth Reptile Economic Confederation.

The elderly woman in the seat next to him clucked her tongue.

'It seems as though no matter where you go, things are a mess.'

'Yeah,' said Simon. 'I know what you mean.'

The hopper lifted gracefully from the terminal, and for a moment Simon had a view of the riot he'd helped start, flames and floodlights stabbing through the night in a seething pattern on the ground.

Overcity Eight, here I come, he thought, and reached for his stims.

282

Mimas

The rescue autopilot cut in point eight of a second after the ship's pilot lost consciousness. The *Zero Discipline* was losing a little height, so it gently lifted it up, engaging the retros as it sailed over the edge of Herschel Crater.

The autopilot checked the life-support and fuel reserves – no problem – and did a scan for the nearest signs of civilization. It knew where the major, minor and minuscule spaceports were throughout the solar system, but it wanted to get its passengers to proper medical attention as soon as possible.

There was a base up ahead in the crater, less than fifty kilometres away. It wasn't putting out a navigation index signal, but there were lights and some movement. The autopilot had been putting out a standard distress signal ever since it had kicked in; they would have heard it by now, be ready for the shuttle's arrival.

Softly it lifted, pointing its nose towards the white buildings, shapes like beads against the rocky ice, and carried its crew to help in silence.

Valles Marianas, Mars

'Minus fifty, Woodchuck. Fire for effect.'

Muller's voice was a comforting mumble in Vincenzi's ear.

While she and her tiny team of forward observers were still in operation, the slow eastward crawl could continue.

Achebe Rim was still another twenty klicks ahead of the tanks.

That was where the defenders would have their last chance to keep out the rebels. Once they were inside the Gorge, Vincenzi expected fierce but small-scale resistance.

They'd been caught in strafing fire in the Noctis Labyrinthus, the defenders' first response to the drop. The tank had stopped for repairs, a wheel almost torn loose in a clumsy DropShip landing.

The driver had caught a ricochet from the tank itself, its polycarbide armour throwing away a projectile in a lethal spray.

The mortars, set up in the first drop, had knocked three of the four aircraft down. There hadn't been another strafing run.

Vincenzi took the driver's position when they climbed back inside the tank. He liked to see where he was going.

283

There was a ferocious exchange of fire whizzing overhead, as the ISN's Command Centre lobbed smart missiles at the mortars and the Rim mortars lobbed smart missiles at anything that got in the way of the tanks. Funny thing, thought Vincenzi – who won depended not on how smart the commanders or the troops were, but on how smart the bombs were.

Muller's crew were on foot, moving at a steady twelve klicks an hour, reporting back everything they saw. The defenders were a small force, but hand-picked. They kept popping up out of nowhere, in three-person trike tanks or even on foot. Muller and the other forward observers would paint them with lasers for half a second, and then run like hell, calling in their positions. Laser-reflective armour on the trike tanks and shootsuits only made targeting easier.

'Plus twenty, Woodchuck. Fire for effect.'

A handful of observers on foot would be virtually invisible to whatever sensors the defenders had left, blips that flickered on and off their screens, mimetic armour hopelessly confusing pattern recognition algorithms. Like ghosts, thought Vincenzi.

The C and C was really configured for big, clumsy attacks by big, clumsy aliens in orbit.

The tanks had only engaged the enemy once, a very short, very furious battle as they left the Noctis Labyrinthus. Fast-moving trike tanks, just big enough for a couple of lasers and a one-shot missile. They were no match for the real tanks.

Vincenzi figured they weren't getting enough information from their orbital lenses, probably because the battle upstairs had knocked out half of them. So they wanted a look for themselves.

Now they knew what they were in for when the rebels hit Achebe Rim.

They'd probably been surprised to see that the attackers were human.

They'd be getting ready to close up the Command Centre, a plasticrete building nine-tenths buried under the plain in Achebe Gorge, just one conical storey showing above the ground. The solar system's hardest hardened target. You could drop a nuke or even a small asteroid on it without cracking it.

Personally, Vincenzi would have preferred to drop a big asteroid on it, but there was the civilian population to consider.

Inside the centre, they'd be watching their screens. Astonished?

Horrified? Unsurprised? They couldn't expect any help from the 31st Corp HQ, who had their hands full with a commando raid on Olympus Mons which had started a distracting half-hour before the first drop. Or from the 202nd Orbital Artillery Brigade, who were bust defending Phobos.

'I'm real glad I don't work for these guys right now,' said Vincenzi, out loud. His gunner snickered.

Mimas

Chris felt someone brushing their fingers across his forehead, like spider's feet dancing on his brain.

He decided there was no point in pretending to be asleep.

Well-spotted, said a voice in his head.

'Ow,' said Chris. 'Don't do that.'

He opened his eyes. Iaomnet was looking down at him.

No, she wasn't. Iaomnet was long gone.

He jerked back, surprised to find he wasn't restrained, the blank look in her eyes making his stomach turn. He knew what it reminded him of. A crocodile's eyes, permanently jammed open by translucent scales.

It wasn't that she didn't blink, that she had a hypnotic stare, or laser beams coming out of her pupils or anything. Her eyes were the same dark colour as when he'd first looked into them aboard the Hopper, months ago.

But there was nobody home. Someone was looking *through* her eyes.

A lot of someones, said the Brotherhood.

Their voices *crawled*. He was backed against the wall, wanting nothing more than to get away from her.

'Where's the Doctor?' he said.

You're both safe and well, said the Brotherhood. *The rescue autopilot brought you down on the landing pad of our base.*

'That was you,' said Chris. 'You attacked us in the shuttle. We could have crashed!'

He looked around the room, everywhere but at her. The wall was curved, everything was made from inflatable plasticrete.

Some kind of building on the surface, then.

'Where's the Doctor?' said Chris again.

We'll bring you to him shortly, said the Brotherhood. *Yes, I did scan your mind while you were unconscious. It's a shame the Doctor didn't tell you his plan.*

'He –'

I suppose it's possible you're right, he doesn't have a plan at all, to make sure we can't anticipate it. His mind is almost impossible to read.

Something cold went down Chris's spine. 'How long have I been unconscious?' he said.

Twenty-four hours.

Chris lunged at her. He'd barely begun to move when a ton of psychokinetic force fell on him, pinning him to the bed at an awkward angle.

'Let me see him,' gasped Chris.

All right, said Iaomnet. She released the pressure. *We're just about ready for you, anyway.*

Achebe Gorge, Mars

Vincenzi and Muller sat side by side on a fallen beam.

Vincenzi was smoking. 'You want one?'

'Dirty habit,' said the stocky sergeant. 'Terrible for your health.'

There was a flash of weapons fire in the distance, on the outside of Achebe Rim. 'Why do so many soldiers smoke, Sergeant?' Vincenzi asked.

'A smart missile is much worse for your health, sir,' she said.

Vincenzi grinned. 'Report.'

'We sustained light casualties only, sir. I'm working on the precise figure. The Unitatus will be making their drop in forty minutes. They'll convey us back to the *Victoria* and continue the clean-up operation. The defenders' actions are limited to small pockets of resistance along our route. A few young ones too stubborn to give up.'

'They've probably forgotten to tell them to surrender,' said Vincenzi.

Everything had gone very much according to plan. The defenders had collapsed the Rim gap they'd been aiming for with high explosives. But they'd fitted the tanks with outsystem mining tracks, and had just crawled up and over the rubble and into the Gorge.

After that, there was a lot of very intelligent but utterly hopeless resistance. Vincenzi had personally lobbed a shell into the conical

surface of the C and C building, watching it crash down.

Now he and the sergeant were sitting in the rubble, on top of the biggest, toughest door in the solar system.

'What do you suppose they're doing down there?' he said, drawing a line in the ash and dirt with the tip of his boot.

'Breathing hard, sir,' said Muller.

Mimas

The Doctor was sitting in a buggy, a tiny, spidery vehicle designed to handle rough terrain in very low gravity. There were seats for four; he sat right at the back, hands clasped in his lap, head leaning against the window. He was very pale.

Iaomnet watched from the hangar floor as Chris climbed into the vehicle, the only one in sight. She pulled the door closed behind him.

'I don't feel very well,' said the Doctor.

Chris bit his lip. He put a hand on the Doctor's arm, frightened by how light he felt. It wasn't just the tiny gravity. The Doctor felt paper-thin, as though he wasn't quite there.

'What are we going to do?' said Chris.

The Doctor put a finger to his lips.

Iaomnet climbed aboard and shut the outer door. There was an ear-popping puff as the buggy pressurized. Iaomnet strapped herself into the driver's seat. Banks of lights switched on in the dimness of the vehicle. She pulled the HUDS visor down over her left eye.

She turned around, her face half covered by machinery. 'Don't worry,' said Chris. 'I'm not going to try anything.'

The engines were a tiny grinding sound under their feet. It didn't take much power to shift the buggy's eight wheels. They rumbled softly forwards, the hangar's airlock door automatically sliding upward. A minute later, they were on Mimas's surface.

The Doctor looked as though he was asleep. Chris decided to let him rest; there was nothing to talk about while the Brotherhood were

listening, anyway. He looked past the exhausted Time Lord, on to the surface.

The crater was something like ten klicks deep. The near rim cast an inky shadow, rising up to hide the stars. Chris tried hard not to think of it as a great big mouth.

At this temperature, ice acted like rock. He could see huge pits and scars where other meteorites had hailed down on Mimas. He tried to imagine huge machines sculpting the crater, tiny suited figures welding together the skeleton of the rim walls, creating a massive fake.

'I'm not going to make it through this,' said the Doctor.

Chris looked at him. 'We'll be all right.' The Doctor looked as though he could barely open his eyes. 'What did they do to you?'

'Oh, they haven't even started yet,' he said. 'The entire gestalt is here, Chris. Deep beneath the surface. The new Grandmaster.'

Waiting for you, said Iaomnet, making Chris jump. *We've been waiting for a long time.*

'Iaomnet tried a few basic scans,' said the Doctor. 'They're very powerful, Chris. I won't be able to keep them out of my head.'

Chris sat back in his seat. The Doctor had always relied on tricking his enemies, knowing more than they did. How do you keep an ace up your sleeve when the Brotherhood can see right up your sleeve?

Relax, said Iaomnet. *He doesn't have a clever plan this time. I could tell that even from my initial scans. He's so desperate to stop us he's rushed in.* Chris could see her reflection in the windscreen. *It's almost as though he wanted to become one of us,* she said.

Janus

288

The Chief Programmer's beeper went off at 01.00 local time.

She rolled out of bed and on to the floor. 'Cruk,' she said, picking herself up and snatching the beeper from the bedside table. She hit the transmit button. 'Timmins,' she said. What's up?'

'You'd better come and see this,' said whatever poor sod had drawn

night-watch duty in the computer centre.

‘That bad, huh? Let me guess. The counterintrusion routines have gone off again for no reason.’

‘The counterintrusion routines have gone over to the other side, ma’am,’ said the night watch.

‘Say that again,’ said Timmins.

‘I think you’d better get down here, ma’am.’

Timmins got down there. The compute centre was a smallish, octagonal room, the eight wall panels giving you access to every part of the main system. The night watch and a couple of bleary-eyed techies were standing around, looking useless.

‘Let’s get to work,’ said Timmins. ‘What exactly is the problem here?’

‘Me,’ said the computer.

‘Very funny,’ said Timmins.

‘It’s an AI, ma’am,’ said night watch. His name refused to spring to her mind. ‘It began a download at zero hours exactly.

We couldn’t stop it.’

‘An AI?’ said Timmins. ‘Do you know how much memory space that would take up?’

‘All of it,’ said the computer. ‘Of course, it’s not all of me. In fact, it’s one of my pieces that’s achieved a certain level of sentience on its own. See what happens when you let your children do as they please?’

Timmins leant on the console. Did the download complete?’

she asked night watch.

He nodded. ‘The whole OS was junked. It ate the counterintrusion routines.’

‘I just added them to myself,’ said the computer. ‘After all, they’re not dissimilar in structure to some of my own routines.’

‘Look,’ said Timmins. ‘Are you trying to tell me that Centcomp Node Number One, the centre of the Empire’s computer control, has just been inhabited by an artificial intelligence? Who the hell are you, anyway?’

‘You may have heard of me,’ said the computer. ‘My name is FLORANCE.’

‘Oh God,’ said Timmins. Night watch’s face lit up, as though he was about to ask for the AI’s autograph.

‘As you were, ladies and gentlemen,’ said FLORANCE. ‘It’s going to take me a little while to settle into place, of course, but I’m here to stay. I do think it’s time that the Empire’s computing systems were run by a real expert. Don’t you?’

Timmins sat down. Luckily, there was a chair between her and the floor.

‘Now then,’ said FLORANCE. ‘What next?’

Mimas

There was a pit dug into the dirty ice, the edges sharp, straight lines. The buggy rolled down a gentle slope. Another airlock irised open ahead.

The hangar was long and narrow. The underground tunnels were pressurized. Chris helped the Doctor out of the buggy as Iaomnet watched. He could feel her eyes moving over him, looking into him as deeply as she wanted.

He deliberately thought of the most lewd sexual fantasy he could. After all, as soon as you met someone you knew could read your mind, all that stuff kind of bubbled up embarrassingly anyway.

Iaomnet laughed. *It’s only a little way further,* she said.

The floor was smooth, but not so smooth that it was slippery.

Some high-precision excavation devices had been here, slowly boring their way into Mimas. The Doctor stumbled. Chris held on to his arm, tightly, helping him along.

They must have walked for twenty minutes, a path gently leading down. Once, the Doctor fell back against Chris. ‘This wasn’t part of the

bargain,' he murmured. He sounded frightened.

290

Chris wished to the Goddess there was something more he could do than straighten the Time Lord up and help him keep going forward. Towards the Brotherhood.

The tunnel stopped at a lift. Chris recognized it as a mining access elevator, meant for engineers and managers to visit the coalface, or the iceface or whatever. Chris thought of attacking her again, but she just smiled. She watched as they got in.

She didn't follow them in, operating the controls from outside.

Chris watched as the smile wiped off her face. She sat down against the wall, carefully, and suddenly her head rolled to one side and she slumped down.

Chris leapt forward, but the lift was already moving, sliding smoothly down into the moon.

The Doctor sat on the floor, knees pulled up to his chest. 'You have to get back,' he told Chris. 'You have to stop Roz. Stop her from getting involved.'

Chris laughed, despite the grinding knot in his belly. 'Yeah, I'll get between her and what she wants to do, Doctor. She'll just make a Roz-shaped hole right through me.'

The Doctor smiled, very slightly.

It took them another twenty minutes to fall to the centre.

31st Corps HQ: Olympus Mons, Mars

At 03.15 IST, Dozy Floyd 739 (serial number GPR29827739 –

How May I Be Of Service?) received a coded instruction to destroy the control centre of the Imperial Landsknechte's 31st Corps. The instruction came as something of a surprise, because up until then Dozy Floyd 739's most exacting task had been getting a decent shine on the table in the Staff Officers' Mess (amber access – report all intruders).

Dozy Floyd 739 had been built by Jseda TECH, a subsidiary of ElleryCorp ('We have the technology'), and sold to the Imperial

Landsknechte as part of a batch consignment of two hundred and fifty identical models. Before assignment to duty, all of the robots had been stripped down to their chassis and thoroughly vetted by skilled technicians of the Landsknechte's Corps Cybernetique. Hardware and software were checked for any indication that the units had been tampered with, kinked or 291

booby-trapped. Once they were cleared, the robots were reassembled and transported to their places of work. It was all done with the Landsknechte's usual paranoid attention to detail.

The instruction violated sixteen of Dozy Floyd's operating imperatives, from the most important ('This unit must never damage a human or by inaction allow a human to be damaged') to the least ('This unit will avoid damage to client property').

Dozy Floyd 739 should have gone into electronic convulsions. At the very least, it should have informed the subsystem with oversight of domestic robots that it had received an invalid instruction.

Instead the robot continued polishing the floor of corridor 15

(cultured marble: cleaning fluid ec682, size seven pad –

vigorous). It completed the task as scheduled, thirteen minutes later, and proceeded to the main computer room.

A pair of booted feet stumbled over Dozy Floyd as it rolled into the room. It started to clean the floor, paying special attention to the skirting boards (acetic acid solution 50 per cent).

A map of the computer room's physical layout had surfaced in Dozy Floyd's mind. It rolled gradually in the direction of a box outlined in red in its limited mind. Someone else stepped over it, cursing.

Someone said, 'What's that bot doing in here? We're trying to work, goddamnit.'

Dozy Floyd rolled up to the red box in its mind. It bumped against the real thing.

A moment later, it sent its cleaning fluid recycling system into reverse, and initiated a series of cascading overrides in its power grid.

Operating imperative one kicked in as smoke started to pour from its ventilation slits. 'This unit is about to undergo massive combustion,' it

warned, in a high, shrill voice. ‘Please move to a safe distance, minimum twenty metres, and preferably behind cover.’

It repeated the message, over and over, until it was aware that every pair of feet had walked or run out of that radius.

Deep in Dozy Floyd’s synthetic mind, a small subroutine wished someone would step back within the boundary. Not 292

because it wanted to take one of its masters with it, but because if they had, it would not have to –

Mimas

Chris looked at the Nexus. He had the awful feeling it was looking back at him.

It didn’t look like much. He had been expecting a major special effect, or something hidden behind massive shielding, or something that the human brain could not comprehend, or whatever.

Instead, he saw a tiny, shimmering light, hanging in midair.

Like a tiny piece of a curtain made of some thin, silvery material.

Perhaps a third of a metre high, less than that in width. It looked as though you could fold it up and take it home in your pocket.

It moved very slightly, this smear of light, wobbling in the air.

Chris supposed that had something to do with the movement of Mimas, or something.

‘Wow,’ he said.

The Nexus was the centrepiece of a… cocktail party? Chris held on to the Doctor, looking around the narrow chamber.

This room hadn’t been excavated by machines. The walls were smooth, white, spotted with miniature versions of the TARDIS

roundels. The ceiling rose to a conical point, high above the Nexus.

The chairs and the tables, with their fine lace tablecloths, were a recent addition. The Grandmaster stood around the room, in twenty of its twenty-eight bodies, nibbling hors d’oeuvres and sipping champagne.

They were a mix of people, different heights, different looks, different clothing styles. Each of them had the same blank look as Iaomnet.

‘I don’t think any of these are the originals,’ murmured the Doctor.

‘Goddess,’ said Chris. ‘The bodies die, and the gestalt just keeps going. Like a program moving itself around in puterspace.’

‘No wonder it’s so patient. It’s effectively immortal.’

‘That must be what they promised Walid,’ said Chris. ‘Not just the weapon. Immortality.’

293

We want what’s best for everyone, said the Grandmaster. The voice was overpowering, coming from all around them. *We’ve been greedy. It’s time to share our power.*

‘Yeah, right,’ said Chris loudly. ‘What you want to do is gobble everyone up. Make everybody join your exclusive club.’

That club has been exclusive for centuries, said the Grandmaster. *Previously, we had no effective way to create new telepaths.*

‘You had the SLEEPY virus,’ said Chris.

You had the cure. Chris saw a subtle rhythm to the way they plucked their crackers with caviar from the table, the way they all seemed to drink at the same time, or not all of them, waves of identical movement rippling through the small crowd… the way they blinked at the same time… *Besides, we could change minds with the virus, but we couldn’t change minds. About telepathy.*

They turned as one to gesture at the Nexus. *This way, the human race will have been telepathic from the beginning. We are the lens that focuses the signal. You will help us modulate the signal, control the change. The liberation will occur. The aeons of silence will be ended.*

Chris looked at the Nexus. Something was moving in there. It made his brain itch to look at it.

We need your help, Doctor.

The Doctor took a breath and said, ‘Take two aspirin and call me in the morning.’

‘If they threaten me or anything,’ said Chris, ‘don’t help them.’

He would not, said the Grandmaster. *We know this is too important a change for Time’s Champion to allow. Even to save the life of his steward.*

The light from the Nexus was making it hard to think. He was sure he could see something inside it, something that *struggled*. ‘I don’t understand,’ said Chris.

Ripples of laughter moved through the Grandmaster. Giggles coming from interconnected throats in some hidden geometric pattern.

It’s always been about you, Doctor.

‘Why? Why has it been about me?’

294

When the N-form attacked Earth, a millennium ago, it changed the Brotherhood for ever. We might all have been destroyed by that horror, from full psis to those with single recessive genes.

And we knew that we would face you, as we had faced you, again and again and again.

‘I just stumbled across you,’ said the Doctor. ‘It wasn’t intentional.’

We could not merely be a meeting place for the Gifted. We must gain power, protect ourselves. And later, the mission came.

The liberation.

‘GRUMPY was part of that process, wasn’t he?’ said the Doctor. ‘You were trying to learn how to make people telepathic.

Make them like you. Make them just like you.’

A good example of your interference in our plans.

‘Look at it from my point of view,’ said the Doctor. ‘You’re paranoid – you think I’ve been chasing you. Trying to expose you. But our paths have crossed at random. I’ve never sought you out.’ His shoulders fell. ‘We didn’t have to be enemies.’

And now?

‘Now I’ll do whatever I can to stop this insane plan of yours.’

Join us, they told him.

Chris felt the Doctor tense. ‘If you do have a plan, Doctor,’ he whispered, ‘now would be a good time.’

The Grandmaster fixed their eyes on the Time Lord.

Who are you, Doctor? they asked.

The Doctor cried out. Chris caught him as he lost his balance, arms thrown up in front of his face.

You’ve always been the one to change whatever needed changing. Join us.

‘I can’t block them!’ shouted the Doctor.

You’ve always been lonely. So lonely. Join us.

‘They’re getting in! Stop, I can’t stop it!’

Chris held him. Maybe he could do something once they’d sucked him into the gestalt. Maybe he’d think of something at the last minute.

He looked at the Nexus. It was shining brighter and brighter, as though sensing what was going on around it.

295

‘This can’t be it,’ shrieked the Doctor. ‘This can’t be how the story ended!’

Saturn orbit, 28 August 2982

Vincenzi came out of deep sleep an hour before their objective.

He’d set the timer for eight hours and a gentle wake-up. Instead, someone had snapped off the current. It was like being woken up with a faceful of nettles.

Vincenzi kept his eyes closed for a moment, making up his mind how to kill the soldier who’d just interrupted his rest.

When he opened them, there was a colonel looking down at him with an evil smile.

Vincenzi swallowed a rude word and leapt out of the sleeper in his singlet and shorts. ‘Ma’am!’ He saluted.

‘At ease, Lieutenant,’ she said, amused. She looked up and down the row of sleeping soldiers, resting as fast as they could after the engagements on Mars. ‘Get your togs on. I want a briefing.’

‘Yes, ma’am,’ said Vincenzi, reaching for his uniform. ‘Erm, weren’t you one of the prisoners we picked up in the Agamemnon system?’

‘Secret mission, Lieutenant.’

‘Of course, ma’am. With all due respect, ma’am,’ he said, tugging on his uniform, ‘where the hell did you come from?’

‘I rendezvoused with the *Victoria* twenty minutes ago,’ she said. The patch on her chest said FORRESTER. Vincenzi had an awful feeling that meant as in *the* Forrester, as in the Lady herself, as in the Boss.

‘I’m your new commanding officer,’ she said.

‘Yes, ma’am,’ said Vincenzi.

Up on the bridge, Captain Sokolovsky was frozen in his chair, pink eyes fixed on the monitors. ‘As you were,’ Colonel Forrester told the bridge as she led Vincenzi in.

The colonel displaced a TechOp from their console and sat down, bringing up a schematic of their objective. The Emperor’s personal palace on Callisto.

‘You’re going to have to talk me through this, Lieutenant,’ she said. ‘I’ll be coming with you.’

Vincenzi found a spare chair and sat down next to her. He could see the resemblance to their glorious leader, although this woman looked older – not so much older, just more worn, he thought. A good kind of worn, like she’d done a hell of a lot of work. ‘Can I ask what military experience the colonel has had?’

he asked, without a trace of irony.

‘I was an Adjudicator for twenty-three years,’ she said. ‘Mostly hand-to-hand stuff, some small-scale engagements. I’ve been in a few battles since then.’

‘Merc?’

‘Freelance. Under all sorts of circumstances. I can handle small arms as well as any grunt.’

‘That might not be so bad,’ said Vincenzi. ‘That’s pretty much what’s required. No heroic tendencies?’

‘None whatsoever,’ said the colonel, with another smile. ‘OK, what’re we going to do about Walid?’

‘His last known location was inside the palace on Callisto,’

said Vincenzi. ‘There was an official message to the Empire at oh eight hundred IST today, although it might have been recorded.’

His fingers moved over the touchscreen, bringing up graphics of the surface. ‘The entire crater of Valhalla is under a huge dome, six hundred klicks wide. Most of the defences will be just outside the dome, on the crater rim.’

‘So we have to get through them,’ she said. ‘If we want to take the palace, and not simply destroy it.’

‘There’s a civilian population.’ Vincenzi nodded. ‘Twenty thousand. A lot of skilled people. Any serious damage to the dome, and they’re all dead.’

‘So there’s no way around it,’ said the colonel. ‘We have to fight our way up there.’

‘And without the benefit of covering mortar fire,’ said Vincenzi. ‘One badly aimed shell, and we’ll puncture the dome.’

Colonel Forrester sat back in her seat, thinking. ‘Our advantage is going to be numbers,’ she said.

‘Yes, ma’am,’ said Vincenzi. ‘They can’t kill all of us.’

‘I don’t want you or anyone else thinking of this as a suicide mission,’ she said firmly. ‘It’s a particularly difficult job that needs doing.’

‘Yes, ma’am,’ said Vincenzi, and he meant it.

‘Sokolovsky,’ said the colonel. ‘Report.’

The captain looked over to them. ‘Trouble,' he said. 'Walid’s

panicking, I think. He's pulled the *T'ai Tsung* out of the action at Phobos, and they're heading back to Callisto.'

'That's crazy,' said Vincenzi. 'He doesn't need two ships to defend that little moon.'

Sokolovsky shook his head. 'He's panicking,' he said again.

'He's abandoned Mars altogether.'

'This is it, then,' said Forrester. The last objective.'

'Yes, ma'am,' said Vincenzi.

She blew out a breath. 'Nearly missed the damn war,' she said.

Mimas

The Nexus flared. The light filled the room for a moment, leaving a searing afterimage on Chris's eyeballs..

'Look,' he told the Doctor.

Something was trying to get out of the Nexus. The shimmering light stretched and grew as whatever it was fought to get loose.

As one, the Grandmaster turned to look at it.

The Doctor pulled loose from Chris and ran forward, through them.

A hand reached out of the tear in the air. Another hand appeared, battling loose of the light.

The Doctor reached out and caught them and *pulled*. It was *him*, emerging head and shoulders from the Nexus. The Doctor on the outside roared and pulled the other one free.

The Nexus burst open like an overripe melon.

Callisto

Two of the DropShips died on the way to Callisto's surface.

Roz could still see the afterimage of the explosions as she climbed out of the vehicle, safely wrapped in her lightweight combat suit.

She'd wondered why the others were all staring at the floor, instead of out of the windows. She'd assumed it was to avoid nausea, though it wasn't bothering her. It wasn't until she'd seen one of the other ships burst apart in a hail of fire that she'd got the idea.

'Get clear of the vehicles!' Vincenzi was shouting. 'Well clear, well clear! Do not assemble!'

They'd rehearsed this, but he wasn't giving anyone the chance to screw up. She ran, following him, taking long, loping strides in the low gravity, trying hard not to stumble. The Ogrons were having a hard time, clumsy, but determined. The long-legged soldier making graceful, easy leaps must be a Lacaillan.

The surface was rough, pockmarked with thousands of craters, huge and small. Even without the dome, Valhalla Crater would have been unmissable, the only feature from horizon to horizon.

They'd run a klick across the flat, rough plain when the first of the DropShips exploded. 'Hit the deck!' screamed Vincenzi. His voice echoed inside her helmet and right through her skull. She was hugging rock with everyone else before she had time to think about it.

She rolled over on the dark ice, looked up at the sky. The *Victoria* and the *T'ai Tsung* looked as big as her hand. She could see the fire they were exchanging, cutters buzzing back and forth like fireflies, flaring and dying. The *Ojibwa* was even lower in the sky, ignoring the *Victoria*. It was much more interested in them.

Shrapnel spun over head in lazy patterns. Vincenzi waited for the big pieces to settle and yelled, 'Move on! Move on!'

They leapt up and ran like hell. There was an hour's worth of running to do before they got to the rim. Sixty minutes, any of them could see you dead. The dome was like Paradise beyond it, you could see the blue sky and the greenery inside it.

The first strafing run came twenty minutes later. 'Eat dirt!' she screamed as the proximity detector on her back came on, even before Vincenzi could yell out the order.

A cutter flew in low, its targets tiny specks among the rocks. It waved X-ray lasers over them in random patterns. Roz heard 299

screams as the beam crossed legs and arms, unprotected outside the laser-reflective tunics and helmets.

She tongued a radio control and shouted at Vincenzi,

‘Shouldn’t we run?’

‘Its computer targets movement,’ he hissed back. ‘We’d all be dead if we were moving. Hold on.’

There was a sudden pressure and heat on her back. She rolled into the shadow of a tilted rock, instinctively, her arms coming up to protect her face.

The cutter was gone, pieces of the ship raining down maybe a klick ahead of them. She saw one of their ships pulling into a steep climb.

‘Up! Up!’ Vincenzi was screaming. ‘Leave the wounded – the cutter will come back and pick them up. Who’ve we lost?’

‘Me, sir,’ came the voices, weak. One just screamed and screamed.

‘That’s six,’ Vincenzi told Roz, as they kept running.

‘Is that bad?’

‘We were lucky,’ he said. ‘If our cutters can stay in position, we won’t have to worry about any more of theirs. All we’ll have to worry about are the Rim defences.’

‘Oh great,’ said Roz.

Mimas

In a human life, there are an enormous number of possibilities that didn’t happen, paths not taken. Theoretically, that number is infinite. Practically, the number is finite, though enormous. Some possibilities, such as spontaneously turning into a fish, are so unlikely as to have a negligible probability.

Take that number, and multiply it by seven lives and an uncountable number of times and places.

Chris didn’t bother to try to protect himself. He let the lives strike him, slide over him, fly away.

One of the – the other Doctors had picked up the glass he needed for his reticular vector gauge at a market on Heaven, and had never visited Androzani. One had ruled the Earth with a tyrant’s hand for centuries, posters of his face everywhere. One 300

was worshipped as a god on Lalande 21185, and had to settle there to stop the incessant religious wars.

The dead ones were the worst. They sought out the Grandmaster like Valkyries. One had stuck to his principles and had his throat cut by a hungry alien. One had had his brain fried by a computer, substituting for a dead synch-op. One had been beheaded by an Ice Warrior, a hideous moment of blood and bone before it vanished, embracing a small dark woman. A champagne glass dropped out of her hand and broke apart on the floor.

Chris concentrated on the sound.

Twenty deaths out of thousands.

Crack clink crack.

Hundreds of happy endings.

One had gone home to Gallifrey and was organizing the first bloodless revolution in Time Lord history. One lived in another dimension and visited Earth from time to time, sparking rumours that King Arthur was about to return. One had been stranded in the Eocene era and was happily tinkering in an Earth Reptile laboratory. One was alive and well and living in San Francisco with his wife.

They poured out of the Nexus. Everyone the Doctor could have been at that moment in time.

Crack clink crack.

Chris put his face in his hands. It was all a bit much.

When the storm was over, he looked up again.

Just the one Doctor was standing in the middle of the room.

The Grandmaster were gone, along with their tables and their fingerfoods.

The Doctor wore a Paisley waistcoat. He was looking at his pocket watch.

‘Is it you?’ breathed Chris. ‘It is you. The real you.’

‘Yes,’ he said, staring at the watch. ‘The alternative Chris helped me hide in there.’

‘Hide in there?’ Chris stared at where the Nexus had been. ‘So who was that?’

‘That,’ said the Doctor, ‘was a Doctor who hadn’t worked out what to do. Luckily, he had me up his sleeve.’

301

‘Come on,’ said Chris. ‘We’ve got to get back.’

The Doctor closed the pocket watch with hands that Chris suddenly could see were shaking. ‘In there,’ he said. ‘From that vantage point. From inside the Nexus, you can see everything.

Every possibility, each choice that’s made, every outcome.’

‘We need to get back,’ said Chris. ‘We’d better go give Roz a hand.’

The Doctor just tucked his pocket watch away. His eyes had a terrible, blank look. He didn’t move.

‘Oh no,’ said Chris, in a tiny voice.

He ran for the lift, but he knew it was already too late.

Valhalla

The dome loomed above them. Walid’s cutters were leaving them the hell alone, this close to his private ecosystem. All the fire was coming from the Rim.

Vincenzi was screaming at them to lie down every dozen steps.

The shells and smart bombs whistled overhead, looking for their head signatures, confused by the mimetic armour. Usually.

In the shelter of a small crater’s rim, Roz asked Vincenzi, ‘This isn’t bloody working, is it?’

He was pulling together a throwaway grenade launcher, hands moving in a blur over the parts. ‘No it bloody isn’t,’ he said.

‘We’ve lost half the company. We can’t fight our way in with this few soldiers.’

Roz peered over the rim of the crater. The fire was blossoming out of a single point on the Rim. Another missile launched silently into the

air. She traced its course with her eyes, heading for the *Victoria*. So far she'd taken three hits from the ground-to-orbit defences.

'I've got an idea,' she told Vincenzi.

'I'm open to suggestions, ma'am,' he said.

'We don't fight our way inside. We change objectives. That GTO station.'

'Keep talking,' he said, sliding the grenade into the launcher.

'Advantages,' said Roz. 'Surprise. They're expecting us to get into the dome, not to try and grab a heavily armoured outpost.

Munitions. If we gain control of the post, we can attack their 302

ships with their own weapons, give the *Victoria* a fighting chance.'

'Better than that,' Vincenzi said. 'We can bring in the rest of the troops under cover of fire from the Rim. We'll have the numbers we need. Big problem is, we'll probably all be killed getting up the Rim to the station.'

'We'll be under their line of fire.'

'True, but their foot soldiers will have the advantage.'

'All right,' she said. 'Either we all get killed trying to break in through an airlock, or we all get killed trying to hit that GTO

station.'

'You lead,' said Vincenzi.

Roz switched her comlink back to broadcast. 'Listen up!' she said. 'We're going to switch objectives. Repeat, we're going to change objectives. We're going to take the GTO station at the top of the hill. You can't miss it. Do not attempt to penetrate the dome. Do not take any additional risks. Do not attempt to draw fire. The aim of the game is to get to the top alive.' She took a deep breath. 'Acknowledge.'

'Yes, ma'am!' came the voices, one after the other. 'Yes, ma'am! Yes, ma'am!'

Roz glanced back at Vincenzi. He nodded, bulky helmet tipping as though he was bowing.

‘Follow me,’ said Roz. She jumped over the rim and started running.

And went up the hill into history.

303

Epilogue

Transcript of the Eulogy presented by Adjudicator Christopher Cwej at the Funeral of the Honourable Roslyn Sarah Inyathi Forrester

The first… the first time I ever heard of Roz Forrester was when I was at the Academy. There was a famous story about her. I later found out it was true.

Roz was on patrol one day, with her partner, when they saw a man throw a ditz off a walkway. He’d gotten bored with his alien pet. When they confronted him, he said he’d never owned a ditz, and even if he did, what kind of lunatic would do that to their own pet?

There was no way to prove what the man had done. But Roz demanded to see his ident. He didn’t have an implant, but a plastic ident. When he handed it to Roz, she ate it. Then she arrested him for not carrying any identification. (*Murmurs*) When he told the judge what she’d done, the judge wanted to know what kind of lunatic would go around eating idents. (*Murmurs, laughter*)

When Roz told me that story, she said she’d done it because she liked animals. But I don’t think that was the underlying reason. I think it was because she loved justice. She couldn’t let him get away with it. It wouldn’t be *fair*.

304

For Roz, justice wasn’t an abstract concept, some kind of ideal.

It was her job, day in, day out, whatever we did, wherever we went.

I don’t know whether there’s a place where we go when we die. I

don't know if Roz believed there was one. But if… if there is a place like that, and it isn't a fair place… it damn well will be once she's done with it. Thank you.

Extract from the Diary of Bernice Summerfield-Kane Dear diary, I'm afraid I've neglected you for a few days. It's been very busy here. Roz Forrester is dead.

Coming to visit Jason and I, was exactly the right thing for Chris and the Doctor. They both desperately needed a rest, in mundane surroundings, and you can't get much more mundane than our current residence – a rental academic house on Youkali, one of the Institute's new residences.

It's pleasant and airy – always lots of room on newly colonized worlds, especially one that's been declared a no-go zone for development while we archaeologists pick over it. A considerable improvement over the tent Jason and I were previously stationed in. The romance of roughing it fades in the memory after a few good soaks in a real bath.

Ostensibly they came here to let us know about Roz. They really came here because they need to sit around somewhere safe while someone cooks them dinner and listens when they need to talk. They need looking after.

Chris gave me one of the recordings of Roz's funeral. I don't know why the Doctor didn't invite me and Jason. I suppose he had other things on his mind. (The Doctor *always* has other things on his mind, of course, but this time he was actually *distracted* by them.)

Jason could have watched the recording, too, but when I slipped the left playback lens into my eye he decided he'd rather let me tell him about it later. He took Chris down to the pub (well, the Tent of Ill Repute, run by a bunch of Lalandian pirates from the Rim).

In the mirror, I had one brown eye and one green one.

305

Chris says most people from his time period have a tailor-made viewing lens which matches their eye colour. Maybe Jason thinks the one I've got in is a public-access lens, or something.

Characteristic late-twentieth-century squeamishness about bodily fluids.

Yellow stick-on note: I suppose it's terrible to think about your husband that way, as though he's a subject in an anthropological study. I seem to be thinking about this whole thing, Roz's death, the funeral, everything, as though I'm observing from outside. I suppose I am. I wasn't there when it was all going on, when she died or when they buried her. I left that kind of adventure behind a long time ago. Now I just watch recordings.

I put in the other playback lens and sat down in one of the beanbags in the lounge. I thought I'd be confused, try to walk into a wall or something, but I was still aware of the room around me even though I could see the funeral. Like watching television, I suppose, my brain had no trouble sorting out which image I was focusing on.

All those people, all that colour and noise… I wonder if Roz would have been proud, or annoyed, or faintly embarrassed. Of course, the funeral is more for the survivors than the deceased, a release of emotion, the chance to acknowledge death and move on.

The voice-over (it was only later I realized I was hearing it through my eyes) says that Roz was being buried near her nephew and niece. Sixteen and fourteen. That's unspeakable. At least Roz chose to be part of the violence, instead of just being caught up in it and spat out again.

The end result is no different.

There's a hole in the ground, in the middle of a patch of bare soil. Chris and the other pallbearers put the bier down in front of it.

Chris's eulogy has me in tears. It doesn't seem to affect the viewing lens.

306

Chris lifts Roz up from the bier, wrapped up in a prepared animal skin – the voice-over calls it a *kaross*. She looks tiny in his arms.

There's a moment where he hesitates at the edge of the hole. I wonder what he's thinking. That there must be some last-minute reprieve, that the woman in his arms will suddenly struggle and curse? Is he thinking about the augmented soil of the Reclamation Zone going to work on her, turning her into itself, the healthy grass growing out of her transformed body?

Maybe he's thinking about the time he and Roz huddled together next

to the fire, beside a Berkshire lake on a freezing winter night.

Maybe he's thinking about how hot it is in his armour.

He looks up, suddenly. The POV swivels after a moment, following his alarmed gaze.

Chris warned me about the Doctor's collapse, but it didn't soften the shock. Even the last few days, getting used to the pale figure in the wheelchair, didn't stop me from jumping out of my chair, ready to run to him as he folded up and fell to his knees.

Maybe my brain wasn't as good at sorting out the real from the recording as I'd thought.

They'd edited in some close-ups from another POV, which only adds to my disorientation. Chris is trying to help him up, gripping one of his arms, while he clutches at his chest with the other hand and insists on talking to someone who isn't there. You can't make out what he's saying, the POV couldn't get close enough.

Some medical staff arrive after a couple of minutes. Chris lifts him up on to a stretcher, and follows as he's carried out of shot.

He looks dead. The voice-over assures you that he later recovers.

After that, the funeral rolls on like a juggernaut. One of the pallbearers kneels down and puts Roz into the hole.

There's a pile of loam next to the grave. The other pallbearers pick up shovels and fill in the hole.

The voice-over tells me that the area will be sown with seeds; within a week, Roz's grave will be indistinguishable from the rest of the savanna, just like the graves of Somezi and Mantsebo. And 307

I wonder how she'd feel about that, and I realize I didn't know her nearly as well as I thought I did.

I took out the playback lens, and decided that I needed a drink.

The Doctor and Chris have been here for a week, since Monday. I watched the POV recording on Tuesday morning, not brave enough to face it on that first night. I spent the rest of Tuesday having little weeps and baking scones with currants in them.

Apparently there were lots of happy endings as well. The Empire's in

good hands with Leabie, he reckons: she's going to do a lot for the Ogrons and the Earth Reptiles and Jeopards and all the other oppressed peoples. Genevieve was rescued by one of the rebels, Simon Frederson, and Vincenzi and Sokolovsky are generals or something now.

Chris's mood changes a lot, especially as he tells all the little stories from their adventure. Gods, diary, I had forgotten how *young* that young man is. He was terribly stiff-upper-lip when he first arrived, then later on he was crying his heart out while Jason fidgeted and I sat next to him and held his hand, and the next morning he was almost cheerful.

He's not going to get over this for a long time. He's going to think he's got over it, and find out he hasn't.

The Doctor… I don't mind admitting it, diary, the Doctor scares the hell out of me.

Chris says he seemed OK for a little while after the heart attack. He spent some time in the TARDIS infirmary, waving little medical machines over himself. He spent some time in the conservatory, sitting among the plants.

He slept. A lot. That in itself is worrying.

After a while he spent all his time sleeping.

He wakes up from time to time. He said hello when they first arrived. Then he just dozed off on a sofa while we were eating cucumber sandwiches and talking. Chris carried him up to the guest room and put him to bed.

308

Jason wandered over to the tents and found a Caprisian dealer who had a battered wheelchair for sale. We spent the morning fixing it up.

Each morning and afternoon we've wheeled the Doctor out into the sunlight. I hope it does him some good. There's a sort of back yard, a half-hearted garden which Jason and I tinker with from time to time. There's a lovely view, looking down the slope across a stream and into the jungle. The weather is cool, so we tuck a soft blanket over his legs.

I can see him from the window as I write this. He looks positively ancient.

I've tried talking to him. Sometimes he comes out of it for a while, says hello. He knows who I am, and where he is, but he just isn't *interested*.

Diary, it's as though he's run out of steam. He's got nothing left he wants to do, and no energy left to do it. He's just waiting to die.

It's unbearable. He is – was – is the most alive person I've ever met.

Later. Chris and I spent the afternoon cleaning out Roz's room aboard the TARDIS. Chris did the guns, I did the frocks.

There was a surprising amount of stuff in there; I'd expected something more Spartan, more along the lines of Ace's room. A soldier's room.

There was the usual odd collection of furniture you find in TARDIS rooms, an expensive Shaker chair and a locked writing desk. It took me almost ten minutes to pick the lock, feeling guilty all the time. There was nothing in there but a couple of old issues of *Badge and Bust*.

The guns were in a huge metal cabinet, also locked. There were a lot of them, from a standard Adjudicator-issue blaster to a flintlock rifle to something big and chunky and very twentieth century. Chris probably knew their names; I had no idea.

He took each gun out, carefully, checking it over. 'We could just move the cabinet,' I suggested.

'No,' said Chris. He sat down on her bed, a creaky old brass affair, and unzipped the bag he'd brought. 'We should take this room apart.'

Roz kept her clothes in a big wooden cupboard against the wall. I knew she had quite a few outfits, though nothing like the number I'd accumulated in my travels aboard the TARDIS… but I was surprised by the number of slacks and jeans and shirts. And boots, half a dozen pairs, carefully cleaned. And dresses. I couldn't ever remember seeing Roz in a dress, except for the wedding on Yemaya… She must have worn them a few times.

Why couldn't I remember?

'I wonder if it would be OK if I looked after these,' I said.

‘Go ahead,’ said Chris. He was carefully disassembling the guns, putting them into the little boxes stacked on one of the cabinet’s shelves. ‘It’s not like the Doctor’s going to wear them.’

Right at the back there was a white dress, carefully hung inside a plastic sheath. Like a cocktail dress. Matching white gloves and a film-noir hat, complete with veil, were attached on the outside of the bag.

‘Chris,’ I said, ‘look at this.’

It took a moment to get the dress out of the cupboard, cradling it as I unhooked the coat hanger. I laid it down on the bed next to him. He hastily shifted the oily rags he was using to clean the guns.

Chris looked at it. ‘When’s it from?’ he said.

‘The forties,’ I said. ‘The nineteen forties.’ I was rummaging in the bottom of the cupboard, among the boots. ‘Look at these.’

White high-heels.

He looked at the dress some more.

‘It’s a wedding dress, isn’t it?’

I sat down with my back to the cupboard. ‘You didn’t know about this, did you?’

Chris just shook his head. ‘I wonder when *she* knew about it,’

he said. ‘When she decided. She never talked about George. I thought she just left him behind.’

I don’t think we ever leave them behind, diary.

Why didn’t she ever say anything to us?

310

I’m sitting here writing, up alone in my room. The Doctor’s probably still lying on his bed, where we left him. Chris is watching sims downstairs and Jason’s doing the washing up.

Why didn’t she ever tell us? Maybe she hadn’t made up her mind whether to go back to 1941, to take George Reed up on his offer of marriage, a home, a life of relative comfort and normality. Maybe the dress was just in case. But she could have said something.

Look what she's done to the Doctor and Chris. Did she even think about them, before running up that hill? Bear with me, I'm aware this makes no sense, diary, bear with me. What about George? What about all of us? If she could see Chris slumped in front of the 3D and the Doctor half catatonic on the guest bed and me sitting here with tears in my eyes, trying to write, would she regret her decision?

What the hell was she thinking?

Yellow stick-on note: I'm glad I got that out of my system. I still want to know, though, Roz. What were you thinking?

Kadiatu got here on Saturday.

How she found out we were here, I don't know. Maybe Chris sent her a message, I'll have to ask. Maybe the People found something about Roz's death while they were paging through human history.

She descended from the sky in a bloody great fighter jet. It looked a bit old-fashioned – I reckoned I'd have to look it up in *Jane's Ostentatious Aerial Combat Vehicles*.

Jason and I were in the kitchen at the time. I was washing up, peering at the Doctor, safely snoozing in his wheelchair out on the back lawn. I'd just made an especially witty comment about the Doctor becoming part of the shrubbery when the sky started to rumble, cutting across my punchline.

'There aren't any clouds,' pointed out my observant husband, drying a dish.

'That'll be a flying saucer landing,' I said. I headed for the back door.

'The Institute is going to love this,' said Jason.

311

Chris almost flattened me, careening down the stairs. He was wearing jeans and nothing else. I threw myself against the wall.

Fortunately, he stopped before he could make a large cartoon hole in the flyscreen.

We could see the ship, now, a heavy thing lowering itself on to the tennis court behind the house. I hoped it was advanced enough to have AG lifters, preferably ones which would stop its landing struts

from wrecking the playing surface.

‘Triangulum Swift 400 series,’ said Chris.

‘You just made that up.’

He shook his head, yellow hair in disarray. ‘Twenty-first century.’

The flat, black triangle juddered to a halt on the tennis court.

The air around it was shimmering with heat.

Kadiatu got out of the plane. She was twenty feet above ground, but she didn’t bother with a ladder or any such frippery, she just jumped, dreadlocks trailing. She had on a white jacket, white slacks, white vest. She wore a violently red flower in her buttonhole.

She landed neatly on the ground, ran her eyes over the house, saw the Doctor, and started stomping towards him.

Dear diary, to imagine Kadiatu stomping, you have to imagine a panther who’s just been given a parking ticket. A genetically engineered, enhanced killer panther with split-second reflexes and a particularly large thorn in each paw.

‘Shit,’ said Chris. He pulled the door open and ran, getting himself between Kadiatu and the Doctor.

She looked at him, and he turned around and ran back to the house.

I let him in, peering past him through the flyscreen. ‘I think I’ll just let them have a little talk.’

Jason had come out of the kitchen. ‘What’s up?’

‘Keep an eye on them,’ I told him, already halfway up the stairs.

‘What do we do if something happens?’ he wanted to know.

‘Um… keep well clear,’ I said, lamely.

It was stuffy in the attic room. I opened a window, and pulled my chair over, back to the wall. Sitting down, I could peer up and 312

over my shoulder to see the Doctor and Kadiatu. I could hear them clearly.

Most of the neighbours could probably hear Kadiatu clearly.

‘Wake up, you old bastard!’ she yelled.

I sneaked a peek. She was shaking him, not gently. I heard Chris swear, downstairs, wondering whether it would be a fatal idea to try to stop her.

I saw the Doctor grab her arm. She stopped shaking him.

‘Wake up,’ she said again. ‘I’m not ready to be the Ka Faraq Gatri yet. Wake up.’

‘I am awake,’ he said hoarsely. ‘Won’t you kindly put me down.’

She dropped him into the wheelchair. ‘How did you find me?’

he asked.

She dropped into a crouch beside the wheelchair. ‘How long are you planning on sitting there?’

The Doctor’s hands smoothed the blanket on his knees. ‘It’s a very pleasant morning,’ he said, after a while.

‘There’s no one to take revenge on, is there?’ said Kadiatu. I wondered if Chris and Jason could hear her as well as I could.

‘Nobody you can blame her death on.’

‘She chose –’

‘That’s right. She jumped down into history and history ate her whole. Are you going to take revenge on history? Go back and change something so the whole future unravels? No.’

‘They found Walid,’ said the Doctor. He lifted his head, as though looking at her for the first time. ‘He was just a shell, all that was left after the gestalt was destroyed. They turned off the life-support after two days.’

‘So there’s no one left to hurt,’ said Kadiatu. ‘No one except you.’

‘I’m the wrong one,’ said the Doctor.

‘What?’

‘I’m the wrong one,’ he repeated. ‘I shouldn’t be here at all.’

‘You couldn’t have died in her place, so don’t be stupid,’ said Kadiatu.

‘It should have been one of the other ones,’ he said. I could just hear him. ‘One of the other Doctors in the Nexus. The one who 313

was quick enough to snatch Adric from the freighter. The one who arrived thirty seconds before Oscar Botcherby was stabbed to death, instead of thirty seconds afterwards. The one who saved Jan as well as everyone else.’

His head had fallen forward again. ‘Don’t you see?’ he said.

‘I’m the wrong one.’

I realized I was in floods. I wiped my eyes on my sleeve and prayed that Kadiatu wouldn’t give up.

‘Wouldn’t it be nice if we all had our own little Nexus,’ she said. ‘And we could pick and choose the way the story ended.

Wouldn’t that be nice.’

‘But that isn’t –’

‘That isn’t how the story ends.’

‘I try,’ he said. ‘I try to make sure the story goes the way it should. That’s the whole *point*.’

‘But you’re not always the one who writes the final chapter, are you? You would have written it differently. Not the way Roz wrote it.’

The Doctor made a little sound. I wasn’t sure what it was.

‘Frightening, isn’t it?’ said Kadiatu, more gently. ‘That someone *knows*.’

The Doctor sat up in the wheelchair. I thought I saw him stroke her hair, like a father, but I couldn’t be sure.

‘Roz wrote the last chapter,’ said Kadiatu. ‘What about the epilogue, where the Doctor is so overcome with grief and self-pity that he never does anything, ever again?’

‘That isn’t how the story ends,’ said the Doctor.

‘So,’ said Kadiatu, ‘how does the story end?’

Extract ends

It had been a few months since Thandiwe had let her robots sleep in her bed. She was seven now, and old enough to have the bed to herself while the robots sat on the end.

Her bots were back on the shuttle, out of reach. There weren’t any toys at all. There wasn’t even a terminal. It was just a hut, with a bed in it.

Thandiwe lay down on the bed, picking at a thread on the blanket, bored. She could hear grown-ups talking and moving around outside, in the distance. Talking about Aunty Roz.

It had been a year since Aunty Roz had died. She would have spent that time wandering around, saying goodbye to all the people she knew when she was alive. A lot of them were here today, in the big house or the huts. The Doctor was back, and Chris, and lots of their friends that the Doctor had collected and brought here in his blue spaceship.

The Doctor had talked to her, earlier today, while she sat on his knee and tried to play with his yo-yo. He wanted to know how much she remembered of things. What she thought about Aunty Roz.

‘I’m her clone,’ Thandiwe had said proudly.

‘And what does that mean?’ he’d asked.

‘That means I’m a copy of her. Mama says that even though Aunty Roz is an ancestor now, I’ve got her genes.’

‘What do you think about that?’

Thandiwe thought about it. ‘I wish I’d got to talk to her more before she went away to the war,’ she said.

Everyone had been there that afternoon for the feast. Thandiwe had not been too clear on what was going on, and why everyone was making such a fuss of her. She had thought it was pretty funny when they slaughtered the bull, and Beni had walked out of the kraal, looking an interesting shade of green. That night Beni had eaten a

bowl of salad and asked her what she thought of being a medium. She didn't know, and decided to ask Mr Fact about it when she got home.

Mr Fact and Mama had explained some of the funeral to her.

Aunty Roz had been wandering for a year, they said, visiting everyone she knew and saying goodbye to them, and going to all of her favourite places. Now it was time to say goodbye properly.

Thandiwe had begun to fall asleep. Something nagged at her, pulling her back into wakefulness. There was someone else in the hut. She opened her eyes, holding completely still. She couldn't see anyone.

There was only one person it could be.

The Monster Under the Bed.

315

Thandiwe pulled herself just to the edge of the bed, listening hard. Was that its breathing she could hear? Was it hers? She held her breath until she thought she was going to pop like a balloon, but she still wasn't sure.

All she had to do to vaporize the Monster was to switch on the light – it always worked when Mama did it – but that would involve getting off the bed and crossing ten feet of dirt floor to the switch. She wasn't sure how far the Monster Under the Bed could reach, and she didn't wish to learn.

It wasn't fair that the Monster had followed her all the way from Io to Earth. Or maybe this was a different Monster. Maybe every bed had one.

There was a flask of milk on the end of the bed. Mama had told Thandiwe not to drink it – it was for someone else. She sounded like she expected Thandiwe to know what she meant. Maybe she meant the Monster. Would a drink of warm milk put it to sleep?

Maybe she could smash its head with the flask. She reached for it.

She heard a noise.

Thandiwe froze in position. There *was* someone else in the hut

– she could hear them moving around. In fact, she could hear them struggling with something, rolling out from under the bed and on to

the floor. Struggling, and winning, pinning their opponent down on the dirt and sticking a finger in its face.

Right, they told the Monster, *you're busted.*

Thandiwe woke up the next morning when the sunlight creeping in through the door reached her face. She lay there for a while, thinking.

When she looked at the floor, she could still see a pale line where she'd poured out the milk, just the way Mama had described. She'd put the flask on the floor with the lid off.

She leant over the edge of the bed and checked. Nothing. No more Monster Under the Bed.

She went out into the sunshine to see if any of the grown-ups were awake. She glanced back at the hut, remembering the words she'd – heard? dreamed? – last night, just before she'd drifted off to sleep.

316

Thanks for the milk. Next time, could you put some brandy in it?

317

Ackknowledgements

Kate here. After Ben's troubles with writing *So Vile A Sin*, including a disastrous hard-drive crash, I stepped in at the last minute to finish it. Some of the book survived the crash, other bits existed as printouts, and Ben provided me with extensive plot and background notes to complete the bulk of the story.

I can't match Ben's prose for intelligence, wit and sheer unpredictable style; but I hope you've found my efforts entertaining. I was so desperate to read this book that I'd even write it myself!

I want to thank everyone for their encouragement and good wishes. Special thanks go to my beloved Jon Blum, who not only had to put up with my becoming Stress Kitten Kong as the deadline approached, but also understood the plot when I didn't!

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Special thanks to Special K.

This book was brought to you by the alkaloid caffeine and by the benzodiaprene alprazolam.

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